

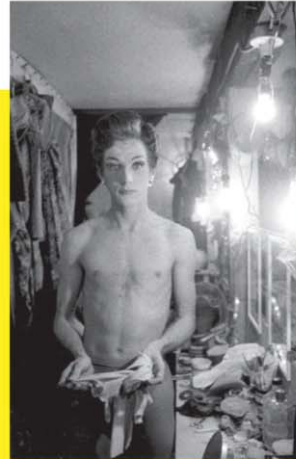
**David Cole:**  
**Trump's Constitutional Crisis**

# **The New York Review**

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- Plus: Chinese propaganda in US classrooms, a great Jazz Age painter, the conscious body, and more

On the cover: Diane Arbus, *Female impersonator holding long gloves, Hempstead, L.I. 1959* (The Estate of Diane Arbus); Lucas Cranach the Elder: *Martin Luther as an Augustinian Monk* (1520). The illustrations on the cover and on pages 4, 20, and 59 are by James Ferguson. The drawings on pages 16, 40, and 48 are by David Levine. The engraving on page 62 is by Thomas Bewick.

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# What Happened to Clintonism?

**Brother Bill:**  
**President Clinton and the Politics of Race and Class**  
by Daryl A. Carter.  
University of Arkansas Press, 322 pp., \$26.95 (paper)

**Bill Clinton**  
by Michael Tomasky.  
Times Books, 184 pp., \$25.00

**Hillary and Bill:**  
**The Clintons and the Politics of the Personal**  
by William H. Chafe.  
Duke University Press, 412 pp., \$21.95 (paper)

**Man of the World:**  
**The Further Endeavors of Bill Clinton**  
by Joe Conason.  
Simon and Schuster, 486 pp., \$30.00

**Nicholas Lemann**

Bill Clinton was eighteen years old and already set on a career in politics when, in 1964, the Democratic Party won its most substantial victory since the New Deal. Lyndon Johnson got more than 60 percent of the popular vote in the presidential election and carried forty-four states. The Democrats ended up with sixty-eight seats in the Senate and 295 seats in the House of Representatives. But after that there was far more bad news than good for the Democrats for most of the next three decades.

For Clinton personally, every significant political setback of his long career in electoral politics was delivered by the right, not the left. He was the comanager of George McGovern's presidential campaign in Texas in 1972, which lost the state by a two-to-one margin. He lost his first race as a candidate, for Congress from Arkansas in 1974, to a Republican. He lost his first reelection campaign as governor of Arkansas in 1980, again to a Republican. And in 1994, when Clinton was president, the Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress, plus ten governorships.

All of us have to coordinate our ambitions with the conditions of our times. Even if Bill Clinton is innately and sincerely a moderate Democrat, as a politician from Arkansas who began his career in the 1970s and 1980s there was no other realistic position for him to take. He was chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, the organization founded in 1985 to move the party to the center, at the height of the Reagan years; as president, Clinton governed mainly from the middle, lost ground politically whenever he tacked to the left, and gained it back whenever he tacked back to the right—most notably in the period between the 1994 and 1996 elections when he brought in Dick Morris as an unofficial but influential political adviser.

It's worth remembering how successful Clintonism—an approach that combined pro-market economic policies with rhetoric that put middle-class families in the highest place of honor—seemed to be at the end of his presidency. Except for 1964, the Republicans had carried California in every presidential election from 1952 to 1988. They had carried Illinois in every election from 1968 to 1988. Clinton won

both states, twice, and today it seems inconceivable that either one could go Republican in a presidential election. In his reelection campaign, Clinton won Arizona and Florida, which hadn't gone Democratic for decades.

Before Clinton took office, it was common for people in politics to talk about a "Republican electoral lock" on the presidency, and words like "liberal" and "tax" had an evidently lethal effect on Democratic candidates. By the time Clinton was preparing to leave the White House, it seemed as if he had built a far stronger Democratic Party. The country was prosperous and at peace. The federal budget was balanced. Crime rates were down. Al Gore and George W. Bush both chose to present themselves to the voters in 2000 as southern moderates, not so different politically from Clinton. Clinton's aides were promoting the centrist "Third Way" as a new political model for the whole world, notably adopted by Tony Blair among others.

All those late Clinton-era certainties are gone now. The September 11 attacks, the American invasion of Iraq, and the 2008 financial crisis, among many other events since the 1990s, make serene Clinton-style moderate politics seem like a distant memory. In 2008, Hillary Clinton chose as her chief strategist Mark Penn, who had come into the Clinton orbit with Dick Morris, and lost in the primaries to Barack Obama, a relatively unknown challenger to her left. (Dick Morris himself is now reliably Republican.) The Democratic Leadership Council went out of business in 2011.

The world has become more populist and nationalist, less moderate, more partisan. In her second presidential campaign in 2016, Hillary Clinton ran on policies closer to Barack Obama's than to Bill Clinton's—as the leader of a "coalition of the ascendant," more than of the white middle and working classes, and with a new, Obama-affiliated chief strategist—and found herself first damaged in the primaries by a socialist and then defeated by an authoritarian thug. Now Clinton's party seems both deeply divided internally—between its left and its center and between its economic and social wings—and especially vulnerable to Republican attacks. What happened to Clintonism?

Bill Clinton's preferred view of himself is not as a centrist, but as a modernizer and a problem-solver—hence the "bridge to the twenty-first century" metaphor that he liked to use, and that became the design principle for his presidential library. He presided over the rise of the Internet and the rapid advance of globalization. The idea of a simple liberal-to-moderate spectrum also fails to capture the main objections to him that one hears now. These fall into three main categories: racial, economic, and personal.

Race had everything to do with the steady rise of the Republican Party after the 1964 election, and during Clinton's remaking of the Democratic Party he often tweaked the party's po-

sitions in a direction meant to bring white voters back into the fold. Daryl Carter's *Brother Bill* is a long, patient recitation of these efforts. There was Clinton's confrontation with the young rapper Sister Souljah during his first campaign; the withdrawn nomination of the black legal scholar Lani Guinier as assistant attorney general for civil rights, after attacks from conservatives; the 1993 speech in a Memphis church about black-on-black violence.

On substantive policy, Clinton's major initiatives included the 1994 crime bill, which extended to some federal crimes the now notorious "three strikes" mandatory life sentences

voters, especially younger ones, are far more critical of these measures.

Clinton's racial policies, Carter says, weren't just aimed at whites, but also at middle-class blacks, by tapping into their own concerns about violence and underemployment in their communities.<sup>1</sup> But he does acknowledge, if rather gently, that both the crime and welfare bills wound up hurting the black poor—the former by forcing more and more young black men into jail and by making the police a more oppressive presence in poor black neighborhoods; the latter by making the new, time-limited welfare program even less generous and more disproportionately black than its predecessor.

Just as it may be difficult today to understand how Clinton's social policies could have been so popular at the time, his economic policies have also looked far less appealing since the 2008 financial crisis. Michael Tomasky's short biography of Clinton, the latest in a series edited by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Sean Wilentz, is an excellent capsule version of his career, and a good place to get a feeling for the concerns that drove his economic vision. He aimed to shore up the situation of ordinary working people through the health care initiative led by Hillary Clinton (which failed spectacularly, of course) and by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit for the working poor, which became the country's biggest antipoverty program during his administration. He promoted free trade through the World Trade Organization and NAFTA—the creation of which, Tomasky reminds us, entailed a wrenching battle with the organized labor wing of his own party. He deregulated banks and stymied an attempt to regulate derivatives and other exotic new financial products.

All this was supposed to produce economic prosperity for everybody, and during Clinton's second term, when there was both strong growth and low inflation, it seemed to be doing so. His economic policies did not, however, stop the rising disparities in income and wealth, and the financial crisis demonstrated that he'd put too much faith in deregulation. At the heart of both the Bernie Sanders campaign and the Donald Trump campaign in 2016 was a blistering attack on Bill Clinton's economic policies that a lot of voters found persuasive, perhaps especially because by that time both Clintons had become visibly associated with Wall Street in a way that was historically new for Democrats.

The standard armchair psychology on Bill Clinton is that having grown up around battling parents, he early on saw the benefits of acting as an ingratiating peacemaker. You can see a good deal of this in his presidency: his obvious discomfort when the people around him disagreed strongly about what course he should take, as with welfare reform and economic policy; his impulse to reassure religious voters who didn't like



Bill Clinton

that states had been instituting, and put many more police officers on the street; the 1995 review of affirmative action programs; and the 1996 welfare reform bill, originated by Republicans, which instituted time limits and work requirements in the main federal support program for the poor. The crime bill and the welfare reform bill have become highly unpopular on the left, which views them as having made it more difficult for the most vulnerable Americans to overcome poverty and excessive imprisonment; and the review of affirmative action, which ended with Clinton's "mend it, don't end it" speech, doesn't get him much credit today because subsequent presidents haven't felt the need to conduct such a review.

Carter writes in a deliberately measured, even sweet-natured voice that puts his account at a far remove tonally from, say, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* or Ava DuVernay's documentary film *13th*. He gives Clinton credit for saving affirmative action at a time when it was under severe attack, as it isn't now. He reminds us that the crime and welfare bills Clinton signed had strong black support in polls at the time and that many black members of Congress voted for both; today, black

<sup>1</sup>James Forman Jr.'s new book, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), also emphasizes the influence of the black middle class on the policies that led to mass incarceration.



the Democrats' positions on social issues like gay rights (Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, which invalidated state-sanctioned gay marriages), school prayer, and abortion; his strong preference for diplomatic negotiations over military action.

What's enduringly mysterious is why someone who wanted to be loved as much as Clinton did generated so much hatred, at least from a portion of the right. Was it jealousy of his success, which came at a time when the Democrats were supposed to be finished? Did his careful avoidance of ideologically exposed positions leave his character as the best available object of attack? Did the institutional structure that conservatives had been building up since the 1970s become a weapon that by the 1990s had to be fired, no matter how thin the justification was? Or did Clinton bring it on himself, especially through his reckless sex life?

Whatever the reason, it took only a few months for supposed Clinton scandals to become a constant theme of his presidency. The first of these was "Travelgate," the series of investigations that followed the replacement, allegedly ordered by Hillary Clinton, of the staff of the previously obscure White House office that booked travel arrangements. This was quickly followed by a revival of intense interest in Whitewater, the failed Arkansas real estate development in which the Clintons had invested back in the 1980s. In 1994, Clinton made one of the biggest mistakes of his presidency when he decided to request the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate Whitewater. The second holder of that position, Kenneth Starr, finding nothing financial that rose to a level that would enable him to prosecute his quarry, switched his focus to Clinton's liaisons with, first, Paula Jones, and then, far more consequentially, Monica Lewinsky.

It's true that Clinton left himself exposed, not just by his behavior but also by his tendency to prevaricate when being investigated, but the Lewinsky affair seems minor in comparison to the monumental craziness of all those years of expensive, attention-hogging investigation of, essentially, nothing, culminating in Clinton's impeachment and acquittal. Whitewater and what it led to was perfectly suited to several aspects of Washington culture, including Congress's love of showy investigations, the rise of cable news, and conservative institutions' need for a target. It left Clinton indebted, bitter, and understandably mistrustful. It is difficult to find anything in the left's hatred of George W. Bush or the right's of Barack Obama that approached the lopsided ratio of attack to justification that prevailed through most of Clinton's presidency—and that seemed to extend to Hillary Clinton, even more intensely, throughout her years in Washington politics.

In *Hillary and Bill: The Clintons and the Politics of the Personal*, a revised edition of a 2012 book obviously published in anticipation of Hillary Clinton's being elected president, William Chafe remarks that, all these years later, there is still very little conventional archival material about Bill Clinton available to historians:

Many of the Oval Office papers, particularly those involving the president and First Lady, have not

yet been released, and the multiple oral history interviews conducted by the Miller Center at the University of Virginia on the Clinton Administration will not be open to scholars for some years to come. The heart of this book, therefore, is based on the work of journalists.

(The Miller Center began releasing transcripts of its interviews in 2014.)<sup>2</sup>

Chafe is especially generous in crediting David Maraniss's 1995 biography of Bill Clinton and Carl Bernstein's 2007 biography of Hillary Clinton, but the truth is that even those authors had to work awfully hard to get their material. The Clintons don't like the press any more than they like making documents public; a quarter-century after his first presidential campaign, Bill Clinton still presents an odd combination of ubiquity and elusiveness. That's why *Man of the World: The Further Endeavors of Bill Clinton*, by Joe Conason, is so valuable. It is one of only two books about Clinton (the other is Taylor Branch's *The Clinton Tapes*, from 2009<sup>3</sup>) whose authors had extensive access to Clinton himself.

That Clinton chose these two authors is instructive. Branch comanaged the 1972 McGovern campaign in Texas with Clinton and went on to write the authoritative three-volume biography of Martin Luther King Jr., among other books; he was, from a Clinton perspective, an old friend, not part of the working political press, and his dozens of White House interviews with Clinton were meant to help him write his post-presidential memoir, *My Life*. Conason is the coauthor, with Gene Lyons, of *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill Clinton*, plus four subsequent books lustily attacking Republicans. He's about as clearly on Clinton's side, and as demonstrably aware of the mendacity of Clinton's enemies, as any working journalist.

Conason tells his story as one of triumph. Clinton leaves office at age fifty-four, in debt, without any definite plans, and in bad odor for having pardoned Marc Rich, the fugitive financier, on his last day in office. Within a few years, he has become the founder of a multifaceted philanthropic foundation that has helped millions of people; a highly paid author and speaker; an organizer of disaster relief; and a crucial adviser to his wife's political career. Along with this admiring view, the book offers a great deal of interesting detail and, just underneath the surface, a rich, believable portrait of a master politician out of office: needy, rivalrous, thin-skinned, proud, hot-tempered.

Except for a two-year exile from the Arkansas governor's mansion in the early 1980s, Clinton had held political office continuously since 1978. In 2001, his most important task was figuring out what to do with himself. The per-

<sup>2</sup>Patrick J. Maney, in *Bill Clinton: New Gilded Age President* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), makes a similar observation about Clinton's office papers, though he insists that if one is willing to dig, "a daunting amount of material is easily accessible." Still, his book too is substantially based on journalistic sources.

<sup>3</sup>Reviewed in these pages by David Bromwich, November 5, 2009.

son to whom Conason gives the most credit for helping Clinton answer that question is Ira Magaziner, Clinton's friend since they were Rhodes scholars together in the late 1960s. Magaziner pitched Clinton on lobbying pharmaceutical companies to offer drastically lower-priced versions of their AIDS treatment medications in Africa, because the previous American policy of stressing prevention rather than treatment had failed. This was something that Clinton had declined to do as president, but now he agreed, and it worked—not with the big American companies, but with some generic drug manufacturers.

His modus operandi was a distinctively Clintonian mix of public and



Bill and Hillary Clinton at Donald Trump's inauguration, January 2017

private persuasion (including getting the support of his successor in the White House, George W. Bush), basking in the adulation of crowds and the company of celebrities, living a life of luxury while helping the poor with evidently sincere devotion, and generating a constant ambient level of chaos around himself. Magaziner feuds with Doug Band, the former White House intern and adviser who was the other most important person in Clinton's postpresidency. Chelsea Clinton enters the picture and feuds with both of them. Journalists investigate the Clinton Foundation's unusual financial and management practices. Consultants, auditors, and managers are summoned to clean things up.

The origin of the other best-known project of Clinton's postpresidency, the Clinton Global Initiative, came on a trip on Google's corporate 767 jet en route to the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2004. During the flight, Doug Band wondered aloud why there couldn't be a new, different, better version of Davos, one whose elite participants would focus on "the world's most pressing problems, instead of just jabbering and networking and drinking little cups of espresso?" Larry Page, Google's cofounder, said, "Do it!" A year later, at the next Davos, the former president announced the Clinton Global Initiative.

To attend the initiative's annual meeting, you had to pay a \$15,000 membership fee, and then you were expected, in a way that calls to mind old jokes about United Jewish Appeal luncheons, to announce during the meeting that you had made a specific dollar commitment to a do-good cause that Clinton was promoting. By the end of the first meeting, the participants

had pledged to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in renewable energy, small business credit for women entrepreneurs, clean water for Ghana and terrorism insurance in Gaza and environmental protection for Tierra del Fuego and youth unemployment in the Balkans.

(Last year's Clinton Global Initiative meeting was, evidently, its last; it is now laying off most of its staff.)

What's hard to tell from Conason's portrait of Clinton is how much of the material he's giving us is what anyone who managed to get this close to a leading politician would see and how much is particular to Clinton. Clinton can't resist watching cable television hosts talking about him, even though it drives him crazy. He is deeply wounded by Michiko Kakutani's negative review of his memoir in *The New York Times*—his reaction gets almost two full pages in Conason's book—and generally feels that the *Times* is out to get him. (It was the *Times* that set off all those years of Whitewater investigations with a front-page story by Jeff Gerth in the spring of 1992.) He's stung by slights from other politicians, even as they're stung by slights from him; there's a lot of business here about who owes whom a phone call, who keeps whom waiting, and who visits whose office. He blows up at members of his staff.

Clinton campaigns aggressively for Hillary in 2008, visiting 150 US cities in 121 days, and burns with resentment over the rise of Barack Obama at the expense of her presidential ambitions—"He considered Obama... both poorly prepared and arrogant." But he dutifully campaigns for Obama in the fall of 2008 and in 2012. He hates organized conservatism, but has a friendly relationship with Christopher Ruddy, the conservative media executive now known for being a confidant of Donald Trump. (Trump himself, Conason reports, expected to be invited to Chelsea Clinton's wedding in 2010, but wasn't.) He relentlessly fund-raises, speechifies, cadges rides on private jets, and forms alliances with politically interested billionaires, but is mystified and hurt when people fail to understand that his—and Hillary's—motives are pure.

Conason spends a good deal of space reviewing and trying to refute the many criticisms of Clinton's post-presidential career for its preoccupation with money (some for the Clintons personally, some for their charitable programs) and the perception that part of what they were offering in return was high-level lobbying. Conason's account of these accusations doesn't have what may have been the intended effect of laying all suspicions to rest, not least because of the sheer volume of material he gives us about the Clintons' business and fund-raising arrangements, and their connection to political influence.

Obama's staff, Conason reports, initially demanded that Bill Clinton give up the Clinton Foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative as a condition of Hillary's becoming secretary of state, and also submit "every paid speech and business relationship" to the White House for approval. Bargaining between representatives of Clinton and Obama ensued. "After several loud, heated discussions, the negotiators found ways to accommodate

Obama's concerns without eviscerating the foundation," Conason says—but the episode demonstrates how large the difference was, even in 2008, between the Clintons' self-perception and others' perception of them. As Conason drily puts it, referring to Hillary's speeches to Goldman Sachs, "Like her husband, she felt such confidence in her own probity that she was unable to imagine how others might view her acceptance of enormous sums of money from special interests."

It's beyond dispute that these persistent questions about the Clintons helped Donald Trump's presidential campaign, and hurt Hillary Clinton's. Many passages in Conason's book, though based on well-documented events, read like a fantasy about "elites" dreamed up by Steve Bannon in service of his and Trump's political ambitions:

Clinton flew home to Westchester, only to rise early the next morning to head out to Kennedy Airport, where a comfortably furnished Boeing 737 owned by Google waited to take him, a group of foundation staffers and friends, and several pallets of medical supplies to Port-au-Prince. Joining him were Chelsea Clinton and her fiancé, Mark Mezvinsky, as well as Google founder Sergey Brin, clad in a T-shirt and jeans and toting a camera with a huge telephoto lens. On the flight down Brin lounged on the plane's beige leather seating while he asked Clinton about China, where his company was encountering difficulties with the government.

Conason ends his book on a note of complete certainty that the portion of Bill Clinton's life that is his subject—2001 to 2017—will come to an end "on the morning after Hillary's dizzying inauguration." Instead, the fortunes of Bill Clinton's party are back where they were when he first ran for president, or maybe worse. The Republicans control the White House, the Senate, the Supreme Court, and most state governments. For Clinton's entire adult life—indeed, for most of American history—it has been difficult for the party of the people to hold together a coalition of less-well-off whites plus racial and ethnic minorities, because economic populism so often has a strong, even controlling, element of racial resentment. Every liberal politician has to

find a way to manage this tension, and Clinton's presidency at its most successful demonstrated that it could be done.

What the Democrats were not, before Clinton, was the party of many of the best-educated and the most financially fortunate Americans, which they are now. That new support provides the party with resources that can help win elections, but it makes the coalition even more difficult to hold together, exposing it to populist challenges including from the right. It's a measure of both Clinton's talents and his good-heartedness that he can connect with voters who are susceptible to populist appeals—especially working-class whites—without resorting to demonizing a caricatured other, as real populists usually do.

In his only sustained public remarks since the presidential election, at the Brookings Institution in March, he gave an eloquent counter to Trump-style nationalism, without naming Trump, by presenting it as merely another manifestation of an eternal human weakness:

It is a very old story. And it always comes down to two things—are we going to live in an us-and-them world, or a world that we can live in together?

Clinton is uncannily good at framing the case for Democratic policies in ways that combine a mastery of policy (something Trump doesn't have, of course) with plain, vivid, persuasive language that doesn't sound processed or patronizing; this was on display in his 2012 convention speech laying out a case for Obama's reelection.

In his talk at Brookings, Clinton acknowledged that the rising tide of nationalism is an "inevitable consequence" of the jarringly rapid pace of globalization in recent years. Clinton as president did a great deal to set this in motion; Clinton as ex-president has become a highly visible participant in a distinctive subculture that globalization has created, one in which the focus of liberalism has moved from the state to philanthropy by billionaires, and from the nearby working class to the faraway very poor. That has made him into the kind of foil that Trumpism feeds on. The question about him now is whether he can shed his liabilities sufficiently to offer real help, at a moment of dire need, to the party to which he has devoted his life. □

## IN THE SNOW

Tracks of someone lost,  
Bleakly preoccupied,  
Meandering blindly  
In these here woods,

Licking his wounds  
And crunching the snow  
As he trudges on,  
Bereft and baffled,

In mounting terror  
With no way out,  
Jinxed at every turn,  
A mystery to himself.

—Charles Simic

# Martin Luther's Burning Questions

Ingrid D. Rowland

On All Hallows' Eve of 1517, Martin Luther, Augustinian friar and professor of theology, posted a broadsheet on the faculty bulletin board of tiny, provincial Wittenberg University in the German state of Saxony (which happened to be the door of the church attached to the local lord's castle). The poster was no Halloween prank; it proclaimed, according to academic custom, his willingness to debate a series of propositions in public. Although he also sent copies of the same broadsheet to important statesmen, churchmen, and academics outside Wittenberg, no one seems to have taken up his challenge to a formal discussion. His propositions were too explosive for that; in blunt, forceful language, they questioned the basic beliefs of the church to which, as a Hermit of Saint Augustine, he had vowed his obedience.

Luther would say that his life's turning point came two years later, when he had a sudden revelation about the nature of Christian salvation. For his contemporaries, however, the posting of his ninety-five theses in 1517 set off the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation, and the Reformation in turn marked a fundamental stage in the forging of a collective German identity. To mark the event's five hundredth anniversary, the Federal Republic of Germany has sponsored a series of Luther celebrations at home and abroad, which began in the fall of 2016 and continue throughout 2017. They include an ambitious series of Luther-themed exhibitions in the United States: major shows in Minneapolis and Los Angeles, with smaller versions of the Minneapolis extravaganza in New York and Atlanta, all providing a fresh, insightful view into Luther's life and times and the vast, unpredictable forces his rebellion unleashed.

The exhibition catalogs—two impressive five-hundred-page volumes shared by Minneapolis, New York, and Atlanta, and a separate work for Los Angeles—cover a vast range of topics: Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Martin Luther's latrine, Lutherans in North America, Luther in Communist East Germany, the unintended consequences of the Reformation. The intensity of their focus is relieved by clever, colorful charts and a bountiful complement of illustrations. It is impossible, given our own recent past, to ponder the Reformation without also pondering its darker legacy of religious warfare, anti-Semitism, and lingering mistrust between Catholics and Protestants, German East and German West; and these are issues the catalogs face head-on.

Yet what drove the friar and his contemporaries to their drastic actions were ideas of transcendent beauty, including the profound inner music behind the cadences of Luther's oratory and the stirring hymns that set his spiritual armies on the march. To understand this complicated, superbly talented man, and to make the most of the Luther exhibitions, it helps to have a good biography on hand, and Lyndal Roper's *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* provides expert and spirited guidance. So, in a more spe-



'Martin Luther as Junker Jörg,' the name under which he went into hiding in 1521; woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1521–1522

cialized way, does Andrew Pettegree's *Brand Luther*, a fascinating study of Luther's pioneering relationship with the printing press that is especially helpful for understanding these exhibitions dedicated in large measure

to books and other mass-produced printed works.

The Protestant Reformation took hold where it did and when it did for a

variety of reasons, beginning with the blazing personality of Martin Luther himself. Strictly speaking, he was not a monk, though he is often described as one: he was a preaching friar who belonged to the largest Catholic religious order of his day, the Hermits of Saint Augustine. Rather than spending their time, as monks did, in secluded prayer in a monastery, the Augustinians lived in cities and moved from place to place. They trained to communicate the Christian message in what for the time was a revolutionary new style: borrowing techniques from the orators of classical antiquity and from contemporary preachers who gave sermons in colloquial languages rather than Latin, they appealed openly to the emotions of their hearers.

Friar Martin focused his ire (and most of the ninety-five theses) on one particular practice of the institutional church: the sale of indulgences. These papal dispensations, confirmed by paper certificates, grew out of a traditional medieval conviction that prayer, repentance, good works, and pilgrimage could atone in some measure for sin. It was even possible to do penance for someone else, as Luther did during his stay in Rome, kneeling on the steps of the Holy Stairs at Saint John Lateran to earn an indulgence for his grandfather. Giving alms or endowing a church could also earn remission from sins, reducing the amount of time a person would need to spend after death in the uncomfortable realm of Purgatory, where, in late medieval Christian belief, human souls were gradually cleansed of their iniquities until they were pure enough to enter the Earthly Paradise, there to await final admission to Heaven on Judgment Day. By the late fifteenth century, however, remission from sins could simply be purchased from a papal agent, for oneself or for another person, whether alive or deceased.

The sale of indulgences became an industry only in Luther's own lifetime and in his own lands, put into place by the "warrior Pope" Julius II and the Augsburg banker Jakob Fugger. After 1506, pope and banker directed the revenue from German indulgences toward the rebuilding of Saint Peter's in Rome. "Martin Luther: Art and the Reformation," a monumental exhibition that took inspired advantage of the Minneapolis Institute of Art's spacious galleries, and "Word and Image: Martin Luther's Reformation," a scaled-down version of the Minneapolis show tailored to the intimate spaces of the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, displayed specially-made "indulgence chests," iron-bound coffers with handy coin slots, the equivalent of immense, armor-plated piggy banks.

These heavy wooden boxes with their multiple locks demonstrate the extent to which the German states were exporting huge quantities of metal to Rome and receiving printed slips of paper in return, exchanging material wealth for the equivalent of checks that drew on the currency of heaven rather than earth. Jakob Fugger took a 3 percent cut—in coins, not release from Purgatory—on every shipment

## BOOKS AND EXHIBITIONS DISCUSSED IN THIS REVIEW

**Martin Luther: Art and the Reformation**  
an exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, October 30, 2016–January 15, 2017. Catalog of the exhibition edited by Anne-Simone Rous, Katrin Herbst, Ralf Kluttig-Altman, and others. Dresden: Sandstein, two volumes, 998 pp., \$69.96

**Word and Image: Martin Luther's Reformation**  
an exhibition at the Morgan Library and Museum, New York City, October 7, 2016–January 22, 2017

**Law and Grace: Martin Luther, Lucas Cranach, and the Promise of Salvation**  
an exhibition at the Pitts Theology Library, Atlanta, October 11, 2016–January 16, 2017

**Renaissance and Reformation: German Art in the Age of Dürer and Cranach**  
an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, November 20, 2016–March 26, 2017. Catalog of the exhibition by Jeffrey Chipps Smith and others. Prestel, 239 pp., \$49.95

**Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet**  
by Lyndal Roper. Random House, 540 pp., \$40.00

**Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation**  
by Andrew Pettegree. Penguin, 383 pp., \$29.95; \$18.00 (paper)



south. Is it any wonder that the man who finally pulled the plug on this improbable trade knew a thing or two himself about the value of metal?

In later life, in one of his famous dinner-table conversations, Martin Luther claimed to come from modest origins, and indeed his father, Hans Luder, ended his life in financial trouble. But in 1483, when Martin came into the world, the Luders were a prosperous family of copper smelters living in the foothills of the ore-rich Harz Mountains. Archaeological remains excavated from the family compound in Mansfeld, where Martin spent his childhood, tell a tale of affluence.

The exhibitions in Minneapolis and New York included fine glassware among the beer steins, as well as gold sequins and other ornaments from the Luder girls' dresses, buried, perhaps, when plague struck the city in 1505 and killed two of the Luder boys. Dorothea Luder, Martin's sister, had to sacrifice a monogrammed gold buckle along with her belt for fear of contagion. The family's rubbish pit also yielded copper slag and an abundance of pig and goose bones, further signs of the household's prosperity. Hand-rolled clay marbles may have been Martin's own, along with bowling pins made of knucklebones with a metal weight sunk into one end.

To a remarkable extent, as these exhibitions reveal, Luther's world, and Luther's Reformation, revolved around metal. The silver, copper, lead, and iron mined from the Harz Mountains and smelted in small-scale factories like Hans Luder's copper works took

up only a corner of an international market in which Jakob Fugger was one of the most aggressive participants. Fugger may have been shipping coins by the cofferful to the pope in Rome, but metal was also flowing into his own treasury from his silver and copper mines in Tyrol and Bohemia.

Almost every aspect of these impressive exhibitions intersected with metal somewhere. Friar Martin, for instance, probably stuck his theses to the Castle Church door using glue or wax rather than expending precious metal to nail them. German expertise with metallurgy was so renowned in Renaissance Europe that Italian jewelers sought technical advice from their German colleagues.

At the same time, German artists absorbed lessons in style from Italians, so that Hans Reinhardt and Wenzel Jamnitzer became as internationally renowned for their gold- and silver-smithing in the early sixteenth century as Albrecht Dürer was for his copperplate engraving, all three of them joining incomparable German craftsmanship to Italian-inspired flair. The metal typefaces that broadcast the arguments of Reformers and Roman traditionalists back and forth across Europe originated among German metalworkers, and so did the glittering weapons and guns that would soon be carrying out the butchery of new and vicious religious wars. The first treatise on metallurgy was written by an Italian, Vannoccio Biringuccio, but he gained his experience with lead and silver at the Fugger mines in Tyrol.

And metals, of course, meant money. Between 1508 and 1524, Fugger's firm

not only managed the business of indulgences for the German states, but also struck the coins produced by the papal mint in Rome, as Luther may well have learned (or known already) when he visited that city in the winter of 1510–1511. He certainly focused on money in his forty-fifth thesis:

Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.

And his forty-eighth:

Christians are to be taught that the pope, in granting indulgences, needs and thus desires their devout prayer more than their money.

And his fiftieth:

Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of Saint Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.

On an epic scale in Minneapolis, an expansive scale in Los Angeles, and an intimate scale in New York (I was unable to see the exhibition in Atlanta), the aesthetic refinement and technical mastery of German metalwork stood out in all its dazzling virtuosity. Hans Reinhardt's intricately layered, delicately textured medal depicting the Holy Trinity is probably the most complex example ever created of this popular Renaissance art form. Albrecht Dürer's triumphant series of engravings from the first decade of the sixteenth century—*The Knight, Death and the Devil*, *Melencolia I*, and *Saint Jerome in His Study*—use black lines on white paper to suggest every possible nuance of light and shadow, along with the dense fur of Saint Jerome's contented lion, the loose, mangy skin on the ribs of Death's skinny horse, sunbeams streaming through the glass panes of Saint Jerome's window, and the ambiguous sunrise in the distance beyond a dark-complexioned Melancholy (Greek for "black bile"). Los Angeles displayed an opulent casket by the Jamnitzer workshop, an enormous piece of jewelry in itself: enameled, engraved, studded with saucy sphinxes and tiny lions, gleaming in silver, gold, and royal blue, with pull-out drawers.

German artists excelled in other media as well. Los Angeles displayed two wooden sculptures by Tilman Riemenschneider of Würzburg: a tender Virgin Mary and a Saint Matthew whose sensitive hands make one wonder what the sculptor's own must have looked like. (The story that Riemenschneider's hands were broken by Lutheran iconoclasts is a nineteenth-century myth, one of many vicious rumors spun by both sides of the Reformation.) Priestly vestments of wool and damask (a mixture of wool and silk) hung in elegant folds in New York and especially Minneapolis, embroidered in wool, silk, and metallic wire of silver and gold. Minneapolis and Los Angeles displayed whole suits of armor, the wasp-waisted corrugated panoply of Prince Wolfgang of Anhalt-Köthen standing out among breastplates forged

to accommodate multiple chins and beer bellies.

What drove Friar Martin to post his theses, however, was a spiritual insight, a realization so overwhelming that it prompted him to alter his name from Martin Luder to Martinus Eleutherius—"Martin the Free."\* The Christian hope for eternal life, he had come to believe, was a divine gift that no human being, no matter how virtuous, could ever deserve—there was no penance for sin that could truly merit divine indulgence. Salvation, therefore, was not a reward, but an outright gift from God, bestowed out of the sheer abundance of his love for his creation.

For years Friar Martin had chafed at the idea of a judgmental God who lay in wait to punish sinners. But now a phrase that had always irked him, "the righteousness of God," struck, as he would later say, "like a thunderbolt":

It is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." There I began to understand that the righteous [person] lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel... with which the merciful God justifies us by faith.... There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.

His thirty-seventh thesis asserted:

Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.

He posted his theses, as the broadsheet declared, "Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it."

Luther's message swiftly found followers, especially in the German states: on the spiritual level with his doctrine of justification by faith, and on the practical level with his attack on the alliance between religion and capitalism that had turned remission of sins into a commercial enterprise. He survived the religious and political firestorm he ignited not only because of his courage and eloquence, phenomenal though they were, but also because the local sovereign, Elector Frederick III of Saxony, decided to side with his renegade friar rather than his bishop. Nicknamed "the Wise," Frederick was as shrewd as he was pious. Over the years he had amassed a staggering number of saints' relics, some 18,970 by 1520, which he displayed once a year in Wittenberg Castle, each one lovingly installed in an opulent, beautifully wrought metal reliquary (several of which were on view in Minneapolis).

Pilgrims flocked to see the collection and left their offerings of coins and valuables, ensuring that metal

\*Because "Luder," the family name, could mean "loose woman," the ninety-five theses already spell Friar Martin's name as "Lutther." When, after a few months, Martinus Eleutherius reverted to a more normal name, it was to our familiar "Luther."

continued to flow into Wittenberg rather than Rome, and keeping Frederick free, unlike his bishop (and his nominal liege lord, the Holy Roman Emperor), of colossal debts to Fugger. Frederick the Wise never entirely sided with Luther's revolution (he remained Catholic), but neither did he oppose it. And at one crucial juncture in 1521, he saved Luther's life by hiding him away in Wartburg Castle disguised as a bourgeois layman named "Junker Jörg."

Luther's bishop, Albert of Brandenburg, archbishop of Mainz, was one of his first and most powerful detractors. Albert received one of the first copies of the ninety-five theses and reported on them to Pope Leo X. The archbishop had good reason to worry: he was responsible for the sale of indulgences in his metal-rich diocese, and he was hopelessly in debt to Jakob Fugger, who had financed his campaign for office. The pope, duly informed, summoned Friar Martin to Rome to answer for his actions, but it was soon clear that the renegade had no intention of playing into the pontiff's hands.

Eventually an interview was arranged in Augsburg in 1518, in conjunction with the meeting of the electors of the Holy Roman Empire, the very German statesmen who faced the spreading religious rebellion among their citizens. From the papal point of view, Cardinal Tommaso de Vio da Gaeta (usually known as Cajetan, "the Gaetan") must have seemed like the ideal man for the job: the former head of the Dominican order and one of the most influential prelates of his era, he was also a trained inquisitor under instructions to make Luther recant or to arrest him and drag him back to Rome.

The meeting between the friar and the cardinal took place in Fugger's Augsburg house. Cajetan was a master of Scholastic reasoning, the elaborate medieval system of theology, thought, and rhetoric that had developed with the first universities—the very system that new universities like Wittenberg and orders like Luther's Augustinians were dedicated to overthrowing for new kinds of inquiry and expression. Luther hated Scholasticism and its pedantry at least as passionately as he hated the mixing of religion and business, and few people have ever hated with Luther's white-hot intensity. Gaunt, ailing, and urgently aware that he might be risking a death sentence, he stood his ground against the cardinal, who lectured him about a few of the theses and let him leave Fugger's house untouched. The cardinal realized that it was too late for an arrest to solve the problem. Luther already represented a movement. He was not an isolated heretic who could be whisked away in secret.

If he had written little before, now Luther went into overdrive, proclaiming his theology in torrents of prose and poetry in both Latin and German, and spreading his ideas as widely as the printing press could reach. He forged two indispensable partnerships, one with his colleague Philipp Melanchthon, the professor of Greek at Wittenberg, and one with Elector Frederick's court painter, Lucas Cranach. Melanchthon gave the burgeoning movement its intellectual rigor, and Cranach, together with Luther, turned tiny, remote Wittenberg into a center for publishing; his own workshop became the crucible of Lutheran art.

Cranach already managed a sizable enterprise from his house in the center of Wittenberg, producing portraits, altarpieces, allegories, and history paint-

first portraits of the Reformer show a thin, clean-shaven friar with hollow cheeks, an Augustinian tonsure, a sunburst behind his head, and a look of blazing concentration. As the years go on, he grows in bulk and authority, culminating in the deathbed portrait of a man finally at peace.

Satires, cartoons, and broadsheets followed closely on the stream of tracts and Luther's translation of the Bible for the first time into German (illustrated by Cranach), with the Protestants almost always striking a clever blow one step ahead of their adversaries. There was nothing refined about Martin Luther's sense of humor; if he called the world a sewer (*cloaca*) in Latin, in German he called it (and many of its phenomena) a pile of shit. Freed from his Augustinian vows



Lucas Cranach the Younger: Double Portrait of Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, sixteenth century

ings for private patrons as well as for Elector Frederick and his family. His state portraits show that Luther was supported throughout his life by a series of imposingly large men: Frederick the Wise, his brother and successor John, and John's son John Frederick, whose wife, the slender, cat-eyed Sibylle of Cleves, captivated Cranach. One portrait displayed at the Morgan Library shows the veins beneath her porcelain skin; in another painting, of a hunting expedition that never happened, Sibylle, in her pearl-studded dress, shoots off a massive arquebus with the aplomb of a Renaissance Annie Oakley.

As the Reformation took hold, Cranach continued to work for Catholic patrons as well as Lutherans, but his efforts for Luther were inspired and revolutionary. Quickly the painter and the friar devised a standard format for their publications: quarto books (the size of a large modern paperback) with titles in crisp Gothic letters above a large woodcut image from the Cranach studio, tailored to the new Lutheran vision of heaven and earth. (One popular theme was the contrast between life under the old law and life under the rule of grace, where the old law is both Jewish and Catholic.) Even before Luther's impassioned words could sink in for readers of his tracts, the black-on-white clarity of their visual presentation already cut as sharply as a sword.

At the same time, Cranach worked on the image of Luther himself. His

(which had never included poverty), he continued to live in the same convent in a bachelor's chaos until 1525, when he married the runaway nun Katharina von Bora.

Luther soon discovered the range of his wife's talents: she cleaned up the sprawling house, brewed excellent beer, set up a pig farm and a hospital, entertained a host of students at dinner, bore him six children, and cared for four orphan children besides. Archaeological excavations of the Luther household reveal glassware from Venice, broken beer steins, and an abundance of pig bones. For his part, Cranach developed an image of Martin and Katharina as the ideal Christian couple through a new series of portraits, small enough for faithful Lutherans to keep at home, complemented by huge, less expensive, paper images of Luther and Melanchthon that could be posted on walls, presenting both the portly Reformer and the weedy professor as Titans.

Roper's biography and the exhibition catalogs squarely confront the legacy of Luther's searing hatred, of Jews especially, but also of papists, Calvinists, and anyone else who failed to see the truth as he did. But what these impressive exhibitions show most of all is an inspired man with an earnest mission in a complex world of money and alchemy, sublime art and music, and burning questions about how faith should fit into a society that had burst its immemorial boundaries. □



# Nymphets in the New Japan

Pico Iyer

"I can't get over all the sexual imperialism in Haruki Murakami," a writer friend complained recently, as she made her way through the Japanese novelist's tales of passive, rather feckless men lusting after dewy, elusive young beauties. I didn't know quite how to tell her that, by Japanese standards, Murakami's obsessions are mild. The "male gaze" so frowned upon in the West these days has long been the dominant point of view in Japanese literature, and although some writers may claim that what they're ogling is an emblem of a pure and virginal Japan in danger of being corrupted, that doesn't begin to diminish the unsettling effect of seeing nymphets being doted on by much older men.

The delicate, lyrical works of Yasunari Kawabata nearly always turn upon a male's connoisseur interest in a snow-white younger beauty; *The Doctor's Wife*, by Sawako Ariyoshi, gives us a woman's take on a world—the late Edo period—in which a couple feels slighted if a visiting lord doesn't enjoy fondling their daughter after dinner; even Yukio Mishima, in his early, romantic *The Sound of Waves*, offers up twenty-two short paragraphs in a row on female divers who are comparing and exulting in their breasts. These days, Japanese women occasionally get their own back, as Amy Yamada, for one, devotes her novels to anatomizing the attractions of hunky black American men; but still, one of the most useful words I learned upon arriving in Japan thirty years ago was the typically cheeky and ingenious Japlish portmanteau term "Loli-com," to describe an entire nation that can seem afflicted with a "Lolita complex."

Even against this background, though, Junichiro Tanizaki (who lived from 1886 to 1965) is a special case. Part of what gives his works their often lurid fascination is the gusto with which the novelist indulges his delight in everything girlish: the handwriting, the regional dialects, the hands, and especially the feet of the women on whom his novels are fixated. But the other part is that he so unflinchingly measures the cost of such obsessions. His slippery, impenitent early novels give us the world through the voyeuristic gaze of his heavy-breathing alter egos—but they also step outside those men to expose them as dupes. "For Kaname," Tanizaki writes of the protagonist of *Some Prefer Nettles* (1929), "a woman had to be either a goddess or a plaything"; it doesn't take much to notice that in either case marriage—the central theme of this, as of many of his novels—is not a happy prospect. Tanizaki's seminal novel, translated as *Naomi*, bears a Japanese title that literally means "A Fool's Love," and much of his early work could bear the same title. Lurching erratically between tragedy and farce, these young books somehow end up becoming juicy first-person accounts of sexual infatuation that can also be read as cautionary tales.

What gives his writing an even wider importance, however, is that, in his unguarded and eccentric way, Tanizaki conflated his interest in young women with his other great concern: Japan's

Junichiro Tanizaki



relations with the West. Like most Japanese writers, he evinces much less interest in the civic order or the political world than in private dramas recorded in locked diaries and enacted in tight spaces; yet he was by turns so spellbound by the West himself, and then so removed from it, that he ended up catching many larger tremors as his country seasawed between servility and hostility to the larger world over the course of his lifetime. The more he turned into a loving archivist of imperiled Japanese customs, the more

Tanizaki came to seem a clear-eyed prophet.

It's startling to see how much Tanizaki's life—and therefore his art—was split down the middle. Coming of age during the Meiji Period, a child of Tokyo's old, affluent merchant class—none of his protagonists ever seems to bother much about making a living—he was as transfixed as many around him by all the new foreign excitements streaming in after 230 years of absolute

seclusion. Turning thirty in 1916, Tanizaki was soon to be found eagerly working on movie scripts, reading Edgar Allan Poe in English, and dancing the foxtrot in the cosmopolitan Yokohama quarter known as the Bluff.

Yet when the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 destroyed much of Yokohama and neighboring Tokyo, Tanizaki, like others of means, moved 250 miles south to what is known as Western Japan, to wait out the reconstruction of his hometown. Unlike most people from Tokyo, however, he never went back, settling instead around the adjoining cities of Osaka and Kobe and Kyoto for decades until his death; it was almost as if a dashing man-about-town in Greenwich Village were to relocate to Boston and suddenly decide that the distinctive ways of New England were much more sustaining than the perishable fashions of Manhattan. The man who had written, in 1922, "There's no going against the trend of the times" ended up doing nothing but turning against that trend as he retreated into traditional villas around Osaka and Kobe and set about translating the eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* again and again.

In his leisurely epic, *The Makioka Sisters* (the Japanese title might be rendered as "Softly Falling Snow"), he becomes the fascinated overseer of four aristocratic sisters feeling the last vestiges of their kimono world slipping away from them. And as Japan began to come even further under the sway of Western ways with the end of the war, that story, set in the last years before Pearl Harbor, gained more poignant meaning with every passing season.

Tanizaki's first significant novel, *Naomi*—previously he had been best known for plays and short stories—came out just one year after the earthquake, in 1924, and sets the pattern for all his gleefully extreme early work. The girl of the title is a fifteen-year-old coquette, working as a hostess at the Café Diamond, who gets picked up by an engineer who describes himself as "conventional to a fault, even colorless." With the vanity—and the blindness—that distinguish many of Tanizaki's young protagonists, the narrator nevertheless decides to play Pygmalion to this unlikely Galatea, whisks the teenager off to a "fairy-tale house" where they can play blindman's buff and tag, and then marries her. As he puts it, with the lack of self-consciousness that is one of Tanizaki's redeeming features, he'd wanted a house, a maid, and a bird and through Naomi he can get all three.

It comes as a surprise to no one but the narrator that a restless young flirt is not going to be satisfied by a self-described "clumsy oaf" almost twice her age with no experience of women. Before long Naomi is dragging her "Papa" to dance classes, where he meets a set of worldly young students much closer to his wife in age and interests. As the heroine ripens into a femme fatale—in Tanizaki at his pulpier, all the femmes are fatales—the story descends into ever more ludicrous scenes of the electrical engineer hiding

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

### Some Prefer Nettles

by Junichiro Tanizaki,  
translated from the Japanese by  
Edward G. Seidensticker.  
Vintage, 202 pp., \$15.00 (paper)

### Devils in Daylight

by Junichiro Tanizaki,  
translated from the Japanese  
by J. Keith Vincent.  
New Directions, 95 pp., \$17.95

### The Maids

by Junichiro Tanizaki,  
translated from the Japanese  
by Michael P. Cronin.  
New Directions, 176 pp., \$22.95

### The Makioka Sisters

by Junichiro Tanizaki,  
translated from the Japanese by  
Edward G. Seidensticker.  
Vintage, 530 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

### Naomi

by Junichiro Tanizaki,  
translated from the Japanese  
by Anthony H. Chambers.  
Vintage, 237 pp., \$16.00 (paper)

behind a sack of coal to see how his girl is betraying him, and then spending time with one of the students, who finds himself similarly betrayed. "It's exciting to be tricked so skillfully," the narrator confesses, with the unabashed masochism of many a Tanizaki hero. "Anybody would be impressed by such beautiful technique."

Even as the engineer calls Naomi "a beautiful flower," a "precious doll and an ornament," he never begins to treat her as an equal. Yet what makes this more than just another tale of weird autocastration is that Naomi's domination of her suitor is inseparable from his (and later her) obsession with things Western. The girl has a name that is, of course, ambiguous—as much Western as Eastern—and she cheerfully assures her admirer that everyone takes her to be Eurasian. The narrator constantly likens her to Mary Pickford, and later sees her as a beauty from a Mack Sennett film. He devotes at least an hour each day to trying to teach her English, and grows enraged over her inability to grasp the past participle and the subjunctive voice. Long before one of her friends starts whistling "Madame Butterfly," we're seeing Naomi as another version of the hired companion at the center of Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* and Puccini's opera.

Tanizaki's novel was a scandalous success when it came out; "Naomi-ism" became all the rage, and when censors and complaints forced Osaka's *Asahi* newspaper to stop serializing it, it was picked up five months later by the magazine *Josei* (or *Woman*). To a reader today, it can seem strikingly similar to Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, from nine years before. But where Maugham was writing partly about class, Tanizaki added a charged element of race. At the dancing lessons, the engineer cannot contain himself over the "honor" of shaking the hand of the teacher, a white Russian, and delights in the smell of her sweat mingled with her perfume. After he finally throws Naomi out of the house, the final sign of her degradation is her affair with a Westerner called William McConnell and a whole crowd of foreigners. And when she returns to the fairy-tale cottage to ensnare her hapless slave again, having been used up by her Western admirers, he doesn't recognize her at first, taking her for an "unfamiliar young Western woman" whose "arms and shoulders were as white as a fox."

The fox-woman is a central figure in Japanese folklore, an almost demonic spirit who dresses up as a beauty to beguile susceptible souls; Naomi comes to resemble not just the larger-than-life succubus of a contemporary manga, but also a kind of otherworldly creature the narrator sees as "evil incarnate." And yet the more he finds her "fickle and selfish," the narrator admits, the more he's entranced by her.

In the novel that followed, *Quick-sand*, it's a female narrator—telling her story in confessional letters—who succumbs to a devouring young beauty. As that novel descends into its own frenzied melodrama of mutual manipulation, her husband also falls under the spell of the sorceress, and finally all three of them plan an elaborate mock-suicide like something out of *Romeo and Juliet*—but devised by a maker of horror movies, and featuring Bayer sleeping pills as the near-fatal elixir.

Though Tanizaki's novels never lack the courage of their perversions—he's often likened to Nabokov—Tanizaki the sophisticated thinker and genuine aesthete devoted much of his energy to reflecting upon the right direction for his culture. The West had given Japan a sense of sexual liberation, he wrote in 1931, but what would that mean to a country whose traditional sense of beauty lay in reticence and delicacy? What would a striptease culture do to those who had gotten their kicks from seeing just a flash of the nape of a neck? His still-celebrated essay "In Praise of Shadows," in which he recalls the suggestiveness of the dark nooks and blackened teeth of his youth, remains a passionate modern defense of traditional Japanese ways.

To me the turning point in his career comes in his novel of the late 1920s, *Some Prefer Nettles*, the story of a man and a woman in a perfectly pleasant but sexless marriage, unable to make a break because each lacks the courage to initiate a divorce. (Tanizaki himself, it should be noted, divorced his own wife in 1930, a radical act at the time, and is said to have offered her after dinner one night to a friend and fellow novelist.) The book is essentially an extended meditation on the plight—and delight—of a "woman worshipper," its main character Kaname. Yet it doesn't deal in comedy, and in truth it slowly turns into a mortifying lament. It says something about Japan that Kaname is unable to divorce his wife partly because he's so taken with his father-in-law, an aging epicure who's eagerly doing his own Pygmalion routine with a young geisha from Kyoto, permitting her "to see only puppet shows and to eat only insubstantial Japanese delicacies."

As the book lingers, in typical Tanizaki fashion, over the fabric of kimonos, the "rough tearoom style of flower arranging," and different ways of playing the shamisen, it effectively thrashes out relations between the old Japan and the new. The father-in-law dresses his girl up as a pilgrim and takes her on a tour of Buddhist temples; Kaname finds satisfaction only in the "natural golden brown" arms of a Eurasian prostitute at a Yokohama bordello run by a weeping Englishwoman.

It's the sting of self-awareness, even chagrin, that gives *Some Prefer Nettles* its power and a complexity much deeper than in the racy tales of doomed passion that came before it. The word used for Kaname, more than once, is "cold," and he's kept up at night by the sound of his wife sobbing beside him. We're told that the protagonist has worked through his appetite for Tokyo materialism and wishes to consecrate himself now to "the sublime and the ideal"—all of which sounds strikingly like his maker. Indeed, as Kaname observes his father-in-law, with his old-fashioned Kyoto "doll," he might be anticipating his author's future, when he, too, will have a taste for the formality of traditional Bunraku puppet drama, will grumble about the ways of the trend-loving young, and, though still preoccupied with female beauty, will bring to it the avuncular observation of *The Makioka Sisters* rather than the erotic intoxication of *Naomi*.

In its almost excruciating anti-drama of a couple caught in an impasse, *Some Prefer Nettles* takes us into what will become one of Tanizaki's central themes, indecisiveness. The 530 pages

of *The Makioka Sisters* revolve around a young woman whom everybody is trying to marry off, but who is such a classic Japanese picture of impassive diffidence that she cannot bring herself to say yes to any proposal, or to say no. She might almost stand for a nation that's stuck, unable to commit itself in either direction; her two elder sisters speak for the more traditional way of arranged marriages, while her younger sister, freethinking and modern, is impatient to claim a Western-style love-marriage of her own. But delicate, unbiddable Yukiko hovers inconclusively in the middle, and might be crying out for some of the bold decisiveness that Tanizaki has long associated with the West.

New Directions has now added to our Tanizaki canon by bringing out two novels that have never been translated into English before\*; both are throwaways, of little interest in themselves, but because one comes from the very beginning of his career and one from the end, they trace, quite dramatically, how his work turned on its head even as some aspects of it never changed. *Devils in Daylight*, from 1918, reads like a breathless snuff film cowritten by Poe and Simenon. A writer is called by an unstable friend and asked to join an after-midnight excursion to spy upon a beautiful woman and what seems to be her lover as they commit a murder. Before long, of course, both men are deliriously under the influence of the "tremendously beautiful monster," and one of them ends up watching the other with her, through a keyhole—Tanizaki was always in love with secret openings—even as the latter gladly gives himself over to what he takes to be an incarnation of pure evil.

*The Maids*, serialized in 1962, is essentially a rambling appendix, or companion piece, to *The Makioka Sisters*, as seen from the servants' entrance, and might at first seem to have been written by a completely different person. As languorous and spacious as *Devils in Daylight* is speedy and compulsive, it's nothing but a litany of the lovable quirks, rustic accents, and amours of a series of young women in the service of an older writer and his wife. The ruling couple might well

\*There seems to be a mini-boom of late in Tanizaki works being brought into English. The University of Michigan Press has just released *Red Roofs and Other Stories*, a collection of four racy early Tanizaki tales, the most memorable being the novella-length "The Strange Case of Tomoda and Matsunaga," a characteristically extreme story of a Japanese Jekyll and Hyde who alternates between being a fat, lubricious connoisseur of everything Western and a gaunt, mild-mannered pilgrim in the heart of traditional Japan. The same press has also just published *The Gourmet Club*, a group of six wildly lurid epicurean fantasies, five of them from the writer's youth.

be the Tanizakis, ensconced in their homes around Osaka and Kyoto. The old man delights in the penmanship of one girl. He rejoices in the tales of "night crawling" and "trial marriages" some of the others bring from their country homes. He reproduces the name of every railway station they pass through, as if he were the official historian of Western Japan.

Yet what haunts one now, in the light of Tanizaki's more substantial work, is that both books betray many of the same idiosyncrasies, even if rendered in a very different key. The murderous couple in *Devils in Daylight* are first seen in a movie house; the girls from the work written forty-four years later go to see "*Waterloo Junction*, starring Robert Taylor and Vivien Leigh" and the Disney documentary *The Living*

"picturesque studies in linguistic geography and below-stairs comradeship," as Proust had it, scrutinizing his own housekeeper's dialect and how it differs from her daughter's.

In the end, it's Tanizaki's very freedom from indecisiveness, his openness about his fascinations, that give his books their wild and commanding conviction. Not every writer would show his male narrator being happily ridden around a house by his teenage bride, without a word of embarrassment or judgment. Tanizaki pursued his obsessions to the end without apology—when I arrived in Kyoto in 1987, I was shown (on the temple-filled Philosopher's Path, no less) the coffee shop said to be owned by the daughter-in-law whose feet the old man had fondled. Ultimately it's the nakedness of



Hideko Takamine in Yutaka Abe's 1950 film adaptation of Junichiro Tanizaki's novel *The Makioka Sisters*

*Desert*. One of the maids is extolled as having breasts "better than Marilyn Monroe's." Tanizaki gives us microscopic, unblushing descriptions of "the alluring musculature between the lobe of her ear and her back" (in the early book) and "the beautiful, lily-white soles" of a woman who tramples upon his back while giving him a massage (in the late one). He could have been not just a delighted judge at a beauty pageant but, perhaps, a fashion director for *Vogue* (a magazine that Naomi consumes voraciously). Even while peeping through a knothole at what looks to be a murder, one of his men dwells on a woman's "squashed Shimada hairdo and a light summer haori of black silk gauze."

This attention to local minutiae is part of what gives the writer his unsettling intensity: when quoting a love letter in *Quicksand*, Tanizaki devotes more than a page to describing the envelope in which it came and how this speaks for the Osaka area, not Tokyo. Indeed, his later works are, as he hoped, living museums of customs that really are close to extinct nowadays in the Kyoto-Osaka area where I live. Yet he's offering much more than

the writer, rather than of his characters, that startles and tantalizes.

In the years I've been in Japan, the possibilities for women there may have opened up a little; the number of Japanese marriages to Westerners has risen dramatically, and more and more spirited women—my daughter and wife included—are claiming foreign destinies and opportunities they know they still can't get at home. But Tanizaki was alert to that as well: one of the nicer ironies of his self-incriminating early work is that, in truth, it's the Pygmals who are completely controlled by their supple Naomis, rather as, in Yasujiro Ozu's much gentler movies, it's the women who make so much happen even as the amiable men sit at their desks, vaguely murmuring, "Is that so?" And as Japan still gestures with one hand toward the latest thing from Paris or L.A., and with the other toward an ancient homegrown culture that it shows off to a fast-increasing number of more than 20 million foreign visitors, it's the man who threw himself slavishly toward every extreme who seems to have caught both his country's malaise and its grace in the same excited breath. □



# Egypt: The New Dictatorship

Joshua Hammer

**The Egyptians:  
A Radical History of  
Egypt's Unfinished Revolution**  
by Jack Shenker.  
New Press, 538 pp., \$32.50

**Egypt and the Contradictions  
of Liberalism: Illiberal  
Intelligentsia and the Future  
of Egyptian Democracy**  
edited by Dalia F. Fahmy  
and Daanish Faruqi.  
Oneworld, 388 pp., \$35.00 (paper)

On July 3, 2013, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, chief of staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces, appeared on national television. Clad in a military uniform and black beret, he announced that he was acting on “a call for help by the Egyptian people” and seizing power from the Muslim Brotherhood. Since winning parliamentary elections in 2011 and the presidential election the following year, the Brotherhood—a grassroots movement founded in Egypt in the 1920s—had stacked the government with Islamists, failed to deliver on promises to improve the country’s deteriorating infrastructure, and attempted to rewrite Egypt’s constitution to reflect traditional religious values. These moves had provoked large demonstrations and violent clashes between supporters and secular opponents.

Sisi declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group and jailed its leadership—including the president he had deposed, Mohamed Morsi. Six weeks later, on August 13, he ordered the police to clear Brotherhood supporters from protest camps at two squares in Cairo: al-Nahda and Rabaa al-Adawiya. According to official health ministry statistics, 595 civilians and forty-three police officers were killed in exceptionally violent confrontations with the protesters, but the Brotherhood claims that the number of victims was much higher.

That fall, Sisi launched a sweeping crackdown on civil society. Citing the need to restore security and stability, the regime banned protests, passed antiterrorism laws that mandated long prison terms for acts of civil disobedience, gave prosecutors broad powers to extend pretrial detention periods, purged liberal and pro-Islamist judges, and froze the bank accounts of NGOs and law firms that defend democracy activists. Human rights groups in Egypt estimate that between 40,000 and 60,000 political prisoners, including both Muslim Brotherhood members and secular pro-democracy activists, now languish in the country’s jails. Twenty prisons have been built since Sisi took power.

In October 2013, President Barack Obama demonstrated his disapproval of the violent crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood supporters by suspending military aid to Egypt. The aid—including a dozen F-16 fighter jets, twenty Harpoon missiles, and up to 125 US Abrams M1A1 tank kits—was restored eight months later. By that point, Sisi had shed his military uniform and become Egypt’s civilian

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi



president, winning more than 95 percent of the vote in a stage-managed May 2014 election. But Obama kept his distance, refusing to invite Sisi to the White House.

Donald Trump, who has spoken bluntly about “radical Islamic terrorism” and appears to share Sisi’s view that the Muslim Brotherhood is involved in such activity, quickly signaled his support for the military government. Sisi was the first Arab leader with whom Trump spoke after his inauguration, and in April the US president invited him to the White House for what was described as a cordial private meeting. According to reports, Trump did not broach the subject of human rights violations, and observers believe that his embrace may embolden the Egyptian leader to extend his repressive policies.

But recent events in Egypt have raised the question of whether the trade-off Sisi has offered the Egyptian public—keeping them safe in exchange for an authoritarian state and far-reaching restrictions on civil society—is working. In the northern Sinai Peninsula, an Islamic State-affiliated group called Sinai Province has launched an alarming number of attacks on security forces in recent months. The group has claimed to have killed 1,500 people—including security forces and “collaborators”—since the beginning of 2016. (Egyptian military officials say that number is wildly exaggerated.)

International peacekeepers describe the fighting in Sinai as starting to resemble the conflict in Afghanistan, with a committed army of religious fundamentalists, rocket and sniper attacks on foreign military observers, and defections by government troops angered by the state’s persecution of Islamists. “They are globally inspired local insurgents,” Major-General Denis

Thompson, the Canadian former commander of the peacekeeping force, said in a recent interview. “And their effort is really to use the [ISIS] brand to attract recruits, and locally they’re trying to redress many long-standing grievances they have with the Egyptian government.” Abuses by the military may also be drawing more local men to the ISIS cause. In late April, Human Rights Watch urged the US government to suspend military aid to Egypt after a video surfaced showing troops executing eight captured insurgents, then planting rifles next to their corpses to make it look as if they were killed in combat.

Meanwhile, a previously unknown militant group called Lewaa El-Thawra (Revolution Brigade) has taken the Islamist insurgency to more populous parts of the country. At dawn on a Saturday morning last October, a senior Egyptian army officer who commanded forces in the Sinai was shot dead by members of the group outside his home in an affluent Cairo suburb. In early April, the group injured a dozen policemen in an attack on a training academy in the Nile Delta. “The current regime has destroyed the people’s revolution, killed its members, and imprisoned others,” the brigade declared in a video released last fall, announcing that it was going to war to avenge the Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda killings. “Our message to the Interior Ministry’s mercenaries is that you all will be fired upon soon.”

Far more worrisome for Egypt’s stability, however, has been a series of large-scale attacks on the country’s Coptic Christian minority. Copts, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt’s 90 million people, have been repeatedly attacked

since the 2011 revolution, and numerous churches have been bombed. Many Christians blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for this violence and supported the coup that brought Sisi to power.

But the most recent attacks have caused many Christians to question that support. In December, a suicide bomber blew himself up inside a chapel beside Egypt’s main Coptic cathedral in Cairo, killing twenty-five. Two months later, ISIS released a video that called Christians the jihadists’ “favorite prey” and vowed that the Cairo bombing was “only the beginning” of a campaign to “kill every infidel.” On Palm Sunday, two attackers detonated explosive vests within hours of each other at crowded Coptic churches in Alexandria and the Nile Delta. The coordinated bombings, for which the Islamic State again assumed responsibility, killed forty-five people and injured more than one hundred. It was the deadliest day of attacks against Christians in modern Egyptian history.

Some Egyptian intelligence officials believe that jihadists, facing pressure in other parts of the Middle East, are intent on opening a new front in Egypt. Many of the six hundred Egyptians believed to have fought with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq have apparently abandoned the conflict in recent months and drifted home. With its erratic security forces, proximity to other jihadist battlefields, large Christian minority, repression of Islamists, and large population of young Muslims unmoored and angered by the authoritarian rule of Sisi, Egypt may present a rich opportunity for jihad.

Ayman Abdelmeguid, a member of the now outlawed April 6 Youth Movement, a secular opposition group that helped launch the Egyptian revolution, spent several weeks locked in a small cell with dozens of Muslim Brotherhood members last year after his arrest for violating the protest law. Many of these young men, who faced indefinite incarceration without trial, had been drawn to jihadism, he told me, by their experience in Sisi’s prisons. “The guys who started to shift toward violence had the sole idea of revenge and breaking the regime,” he said. “They argued that the regime deliberately killed, tortured, raped, and imprisoned them and their families and friends and hence deserved an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” If these men were released, Abdelmeguid told me, they would be ripe candidates for recruitment by jihadist groups.

After the Palm Sunday attacks, Sisi ordered the seizure of copies of a private newspaper critical of the regime and declared a three-month state of emergency, the first he had imposed since the aftermath of the violence in Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda in 2013. The law allows him to dispatch civilians to State Security Emergency courts, where no appeals are permitted; overrule court decisions that aren’t to his liking; monitor and intercept all forms of communication and correspondence; censor and confiscate publications; impose a curfew; shut down businesses; and seize property.

On May 8, an Egyptian court sentenced the Muslim Brotherhood’s

spiritual leader, Mohammed Badie, and two deputies to life in prison for “planning violent attacks” following the Rabaa al-Adawiya killings. The public prosecutor’s office had charged the men, along with three dozen other Brotherhood members, with “preparing an operations room to confront the state and create chaos in the country” and “planning to burn public property and churches.”

Sisi has meanwhile created three permanent regulatory bodies to monitor the press: the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, the National Press Authority, and the National Media Authority. Composed of panels of journalists and government officials, the new bodies can fine or suspend publications, broadcasters, and individual journalists—including the foreign media. Democracy activists I talked to, who were already chafing under a dictatorship that one called “far worse than the Mubarak era,” say there now appear to be few, if any, checks on Sisi’s power.

**H**ow did Egypt reach this point? In *The Egyptians: A Radical History of Egypt’s Unfinished Revolution*, Jack Shenker, a former correspondent for *The Guardian* in Cairo, examines the brief period of hope that followed Mubarak’s downfall—and the unraveling that led to Sisi’s police state and the crushing of the country’s democratic aspirations. As Shenker tells it, Sisi’s primary interest has been to safeguard the military’s hold on power and the vast network of financial interests—land holdings, corporate investments, and businesses—it has accumulated over six decades. He has used the threat of terror to justify a clampdown on any kind of dissent.

Shenker draws a straight line from Sisi back to Gamal Abdel Nasser, who took power following a military coup in 1952. Under the stringent terms of a bargain that Nasser struck with his citizens, writes Shenker,

a new nationalist government would ensure healthcare, education and employment was available to all. But... there was no room for anti-regime protest or democratic participation by the masses; those who tried to intrude upon the realm of governance would be cast out from the national family as unpatriotic and dangerous, and face punishment.

After Nasser died of a heart attack in 1970, his successor, Anwar Sadat, kept the police state intact but took away the safety net that had guaranteed Egyptians employment and subsidized basic commodities. Islamist army officers assassinated Sadat in 1981, an event that brought Hosni Mubarak to power. Also under the guise of fighting terror, Mubarak imposed a state of emergency immediately after Sadat’s assassination, stifled political activity, jailed thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, and unleashed his state security forces to keep the population in line. Meanwhile, his National Democratic Party (NDP) served as a patronage machine for a coterie of businessmen-politicians who, in later years, gathered around Mubarak’s son and heir apparent, Gamal Mubarak. Public utilities and other state-owned assets were sold off for a song to Mubarak’s NDP cro-

nies, who often plundered them, laid off thousands of workers, and then resold them for huge profits.

By the late 2000s, Shenker writes, “unemployment had risen so sharply that one in four Egyptians was out of work; among the millions who had been born since 1981 and knew no other leader than Mubarak, the jobless figure was estimated at over 75 per cent.” On the surface, Mubarak’s Egypt was stable, secular, and welcoming to tourists, but few of those who came to gaze at the pyramids and cruise down the Nile had any sense of the corruption, police brutality, and gross disparities of wealth that were breeding discontent among the population.

Shenker identifies several causes of the 2011 revolution: the rise of social media, which offered an alternative to the self-censored press of the Mubarak era; the stirrings of an organized opposition during a political opening caused by the US invasion of Iraq and President George W. Bush’s quixotic determination to democratize the Middle East; pockets of activism such as Mahalla, an industrial town in the Nile Delta that, in 2008, became the setting for a lengthy strike that attracted wide support; and the excesses of Mubarak’s thuggish security forces. The tipping point may have come in June 2010, when Khaled Said, a young man who had posted photos online of police engaging in illegal activity, was arrested in a Cairo Internet café, dragged into an adjoining building, and beaten to death. When photos surfaced of Said in the morgue, his face bloody and disfigured, a protest page was started on Facebook that attracted hundreds of thousands of followers.

Months later, in December 2010, a wave of protests erupted against Tunisia’s president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, forcing him to flee soon after and further mobilizing a generation of Egyptians fed up with stagnation, powerlessness, and state-sanctioned violence. Beginning on January 25, 2011, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square, starting the uprising that less than three weeks later brought down Mubarak.

**A**fter Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011, power passed to a military body called the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which was determined to protect its interests and stop the revolution in its tracks. In *The Battle for Egypt: Dispatches from the Revolution* (2011), an enthralling account of the eighteen days of protests that led to Mubarak’s fall, originally published on *The New York Review’s* website, Yasmine El Rashidi captures the sense of foreboding that took hold as the SCAF tightened its grip. “Everyone I have spoken to over the past few days is concerned about the current situation,” she wrote on February 23, 2011:

There is general unease about the army and its growing power. We have become accustomed to

tanks rolling through our streets; most of the soldiers are young, and in many ways just like us. But while the military leadership has arrested former business leaders and ministers, and corruption cases are now being reviewed, it is also becoming much more assertive about curfews, and activists have been alarmed by reports that people detained during the revolt were tortured.

About a week after Mubarak stepped down, two young protest leaders, Ahmed Maher, the cofounder of the April 6 Youth Movement, and Wael Ghonim, were taken to meet Sisi, then head of military intelligence. As Maher



Supporters of deposed president Mohamed Morsi at a rally outside the Rabaa al-Adawiya Mosque, where hundreds of protesters were killed the following month in a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood ordered by President Sisi, July 2013

recalled when I met him in Cairo in February, Sisi told him:

“You are heroes, you did miracles, you brought down Mubarak, you did something we failed to do for years, but now we need you to stop demonstrating.” I told him, “The revolution is not complete. We need to change the structure of the government.” I met Sisi three times after that, and he said the same thing: “We need to be united, stop demonstrating.” Sisi hated the protests.

As street battles continued between security forces and protesters, resulting in hundreds of deaths, SCAF searched for a way to end the impasse. The challenge facing the generals was to appear to bow to popular pressure without sacrificing their power. “The military needed a political settlement that combined procedural democracy—the Egyptian people would clearly not be sated by anything less—with practical autocracy,” Shenker argues, “and to that end they needed a new partner in the ruling enterprise. That partner was the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Other close observers of the jockeying for power after Mubarak’s fall, including El Rashidi, have argued that the SCAF was simply bowing to the inevitable: the Muslim Brotherhood was by far the best organized political movement outside the fallen regime and was particularly popular in rural Egypt, largely because of its extensive network of charities and the spread of conservative Islam. According to this reading, military leaders saw little to be gained by actively opposing it. “Mil-

itary leaders view the Brotherhood as the devil they know,” El Rashidi wrote at the time about the March nationwide referendum that led to parliamentary elections; “even in the event of a large Islamist representation in parliament, they would understand what they were getting and how to deal with it.”

As Shenker presents it, however, a behind-the-scenes bargain was struck that seemed to offer both sides advantages: the Muslim Brotherhood would let the military keep its assets and control the crucial ministries of Interior and Defense. The generals would cede to the Muslim Brotherhood day-to-day governance and allow it to write a new constitution. Yet the Morsi government lasted barely a year before Sisi overthrew it, jailed Morsi, and began reconstituting the police state.

**W**hy did the revolution fail? In the four years since the military coup, journalists and historians have offered a number of explanations. According to some, the military cabal set out to sabotage the elected government from the start, blocking fuel supplies and creating electricity shortages to undermine popular support. Shenker places the blame squarely on the Brotherhood. “Once he had the tools of the authoritarian state at his disposal, Morsi turned upon the revolution,” he

argues, “breaking strikes, beating protesters...defending the security apparatus against popular demands for reform.”

The essays collected in *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy*, edited by Dalia F. Fahmy and Daanish Faruqi, single out a different culprit: the country’s liberal elite. In an essay about the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamad Elmasry, an Egyptian-American analyst of Arab media, argues that Morsi was set up as a bogeyman by secular democrats who had initially embraced his electoral victory as expressing the will of the people but subsequently recoiled from his Islamist vision.

In late 2012, Morsi was engaged in a battle with Mubarak-appointed judges, who had already dissolved parliament and were threatening to break up the constitutional assembly and reverse Morsi’s decree keeping the military out of politics. Morsi issued a controversial new edict granting himself, for a limited period, sweeping powers and shielding his decisions from judicial oversight. That same day, the opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei tweeted: “Morsi today usurped all state powers and appointed himself Egypt’s new pharaoh.” Tens of thousands gathered outside the presidential palace demanding that he withdraw the order, and violent clashes broke out between anti-Morsi and pro-Morsi factions. Elmasry argues:

The decree’s negative ramifications were grossly exaggerated in the Egyptian media and political circles. Disagreeing with Morsi’s decree—which was mishandled on

a number of levels—was politically legitimate. Claiming that Morsi had turned into a dictator, however, represented a gross exaggeration, and fed an already existing myth about the Muslim Brotherhood's alleged dictatorial, anti-democratic fantasies.

Some of the country's leading secular democrats joined Tamarod, a grassroots campaign—allegedly orchestrated by the military—that collected millions of signatures in an effort to force early elections and drive Morsi from office. In the aftermath of Sisi's seizure of power, Faruqi and Fahmy note in their introductory essay, prominent liberals lined up behind him. Alaa al-Aswany, the popular novelist who had taken part in the protests in Tahrir Square, praised the general as a “national hero”; Saad Eddin Ibrahim, one of the Arab world's most respected pro-democracy reformers, lent “his enthusiastic support to the overthrow of Morsi, going so far as to support then General Sisi's presidential ambitions”; and the respected journalist Ibrahim Eissa, a “champion of liberal values,” transformed himself into a “political reactionary” who applauded “the arrest of the April 6th Youth Movement founder Ahmed Maher, questioning the movement's patriotism.” Maher would end up spending three years in the notorious Tora Prison, mostly in solitary confinement.

“There is little doubt that Egypt's intelligentsia betrayed the revolution that they claimed to celebrate and support,” writes Khaled Abou El Fadl, a scholar of Islam at UCLA, in a harsh polemic, “Egypt's Secularized Intelligentsia and the Guardians of Truth.” What they got instead was a police state far worse than any previous regime. Shenker writes:

In an effort to shut down Revolution Country, the state pressed Egyptians to turn in on themselves. A microbus passenger turned provocateur spoke of rebellion on a journey; when a fellow traveller agreed with her criticisms of Sisi, she hauled him off the bus and denounced him as a terrorist to the security forces. Schoolchildren were detained for sporting potentially seditious stickers on their pencil cases. A man who named his donkey “Sisi” was thrown into prison.

Today Egypt's former revolutionaries are quiet, dispirited, and fearful. During two visits to Cairo in November 2016 and February 2017, I tracked down a dozen members of the April 6 Youth Movement, which a judge outlawed in 2014. Most had spent time in jail during the last four years. They were among the lucky ones: other members were still serving prison terms of up to twenty years, convicted by pro-Sisi judges and prosecutors of a raft of trumped-up offenses including assault, blocking roads, and “thuggery,” a catchall term for troublemaking introduced by the

SCAF in 2011. Ahmed Maher was now under around-the-clock surveillance and, according to the terms of his release, was obliged to spend every night for the next three years at a local police station. “Even when I was in prison I had more freedom than I have now to criticize the regime,” he told me. He had frequently smuggled out eloquent critiques of the Sisi dictatorship, published in the Egyptian media and in *The Washington Post* and *The Huffington Post*, and sharp denunciations of the conditions at Tora. “I have to be very careful now, I don't want to end up in prison again.”

Nearly everyone I talked to in Egypt believed that Sisi's authoritarianism would only breed more violence and terror. One unseasonably cold afternoon in February, I visited an old acquaintance, Gamel Eid, a lawyer and the head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, in his office in Maadi, near the Nile. Eid has defended many political prisoners in recent years, including the prominent photo-journalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid, known as Shawkan, who was arrested while covering the August 2013 crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood protesters at Rabaa al-Adawiya. Charged with murder, Shawkan has been sitting in prison, awaiting trial, for nearly 1,400 days. “The general prosecutor can extend detention as long as he wants. It's outside the law,” Eid told me. “Many times we find a person after a few months, [held] in a secret prison. It often means that he was kidnapped, tortured.”

Khaled Dawoud, a prominent journalist and leader of a small liberal opposition party, is among many in Egypt's intelligentsia who supported Sisi's removal of Morsi—he still refuses to call it a “military coup.” But he believes that Sisi's position is more fragile than it appears. In Dawoud's view, the dictator has staked his legitimacy on effectively fighting terror and turning around an economy that collapsed after the 2011 revolution; he has failed on both counts. The economy remains stagnant, with tourism down, inflation high, and huge, failing infrastructure projects such as a \$9 billion expansion of the Suez Canal sucking up the country's hard currency. Meanwhile, Sisi's repression, Dawoud argues, has done little but foment anger. The Internet, he said, was the only free space left, “and they are chasing us there. People have been arrested for administering Facebook pages.”

When I talked to him in February, Dawoud predicted more violence and extremism in the months to come. “Libya is in shambles, and hundreds of fighters are coming back here intent on blowing things up,” he told me. “Egyptians who go to Syria are coming back to Egypt, having learned [to make bombs], and they're screwing us. How can you solve this? By giving people political space.” Sisi has shown no inclination to do that, however, and with a new friend in the White House, he seems likely instead to shrink this space even further. □

—May 10, 2017

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# 'Make 'Em Cry, Make 'Em Laugh, Make 'Em Wait'

Robert Gottlieb

## The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins

by Catherine Peters.  
Princeton University Press,  
502 pp., \$185.00; \$74.00 (paper)

## Wilkie Collins

by Peter Ackroyd.  
Nan A. Talese/Doubleday,  
252 pp., \$25.00

There are novels that grip you despite inconsistencies of plot, failures of tone or characterization, lack of depth—you may not even like them, but you have to go on reading: their sheer force and urgency are irresistible. *The Three Musketeers* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are not *Middlemarch* or Proust, but they've thrilled generations of readers. And regardless of its distressing historical attitudes and mundane prose, *Gone with the Wind* goes on selling in the tens of thousands because Margaret Mitchell just sweeps you along.

One of the most enthralling of all popular novels is Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, which began serial publication in 1859—to almost frenzied success—in *All the Year Round*, the new magazine founded and edited by his close collaborator and friend, Charles Dickens. *A Tale of Two Cities* had been the cornerstone of the opening issues; *The Woman in White*, which followed it, did even better—"Queues of eager readers formed outside the offices on press days," Collins's finest biographer, Catherine Peters, reports in *The King of Inventors*. It was like the good old days of *The Old Curiosity Shop* almost twenty years earlier, when the whole world waited desperately to learn whether Dickens would really allow Little Nell to die.

There was a "Woman in White Waltz" and a "Fosco Galop" (named for Collins's spellbinding villain, Count Fosco). There was merchandise—"Woman in White" bonnets, shawls, perfumes. And when the novel was published in book form, new readers were captivated: Gladstone canceled an evening at the theater to keep reading it; Thackeray stayed up all night to finish it. At least one of Collins's other novels rivaled it in popularity—*The Moonstone*, written a decade later—but the epitaph he devised for his tombstone reads: "Wilkie Collins—Author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction." He knew.

Collins was thirty-five when he began writing *The Woman in White*, with four novels, an estimable biography, a great deal of excellent journalism, and two successful collections of short stories behind him; his reputation was rapidly growing. But the new book instantly placed him among the leading novelists of the day.

His first novel, *Antonina: Or, The Fall of Rome*, was a mishmash—an "impossibly melodramatic and impossibly dull" rip-off of Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, as Dorothy Sayers called it.

His next, *Basil*, was so much better than *Antonina*—and so different—that it's hard to believe they're by the same writer. *Basil* is markedly personal in tone—the story of an upper-class young man who disastrously falls in



Wilkie Collins, circa 1873–1874; photograph by Napoleon Sarony

love at first sight with a young woman, from a lower class, whom he encounters on a bus, and who deceives him and blights his life. It's a stab at realism, and it was much admired: Dickens, for instance, foreseeing a major career for its author, praised its "admirable writing" and "delicate discrimination of character." In *Wilkie Collins*, Collins's latest biographer, the prodigious Peter Ackroyd, with his bent for hyperbole, calls it "a novel of fatality and obsession that might almost earn a place beside the great Russian novels of love and madness." No, Mr. Ackroyd, not even "almost." But it remains readable both for its realistic surface account of London life, anticipating George Gissing, and its highly charged melodrama. It's very, very far from Dostoevsky, but it's a respectable precursor of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*.

These and Collins's other early ventures into fiction reveal a hard-working, highly capable craftsman, but one still in search of his true métier. With the first installment of *The Woman in White*, his essential style and power broke through. Dickens (himself no slouch in the hyperbole department) hailed it as one of the two most dramatic scenes in literature, the other being the march of the women to Versailles in Carlyle's *The French Revolution*.

Walter Hartright, Collins's hero, is walking alone through London, late at night,

when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.

I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

From here the novel rushes forward, inexorably unspooling its riveting story of mistaken identity, faked death, kidnapping, conspiracy, and lunatic asylums, all revealed in a series of interlocking narratives by the characters themselves, and all convincing because the voices are so natural; so *normal*. Nothing here of the high Gothic nonsense of Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, and "Monk" Lewis, but a patina of domesticity laid over a cruel and vicious story. Henry James gave credit to Collins for

introducing into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors.... Instead of the terrors of Udolpho we were treated to the terrors of

the cheerful country house, or the London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible.

Collins is generally regarded as the inventor of what came to be known as the "sensation novel"—a contemporary story crammed with lurid incidents and constantly building in suspense. (His principle in writing fiction, he liked to say, was "Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait.") At its most extreme, the melodrama is out of control, as in one of his later—and worst—novels, *The Two Destinies*, about which *The Saturday Review* said:

This is an amazingly silly book.... It records, if we have counted rightly, three attempts at suicide, two plots to murder, one case of bigamy, two bankruptcies, one sanguinary attack by Indians, three visions, numberless dreams, and one shipwreck.

But his four most considerable works compel belief because they're anchored in credible characters and superbly crafted plots. And in *The Moonstone* there is practically no "sensation" at all. Instead, we identify it as the grandfather of all detective novels, featuring, as it does, a baffling crime, a handful of plausible suspects, a startling yet logical solution, and a perfectly conceived venue: an isolated English country house, complete with loyal old family retainer and ex-convict maid. Again, you accept the complicated story because you believe the voices of the narrators, from the mercurial hero to the elderly Gabriel Betteredge (with his conviction that everything worth knowing can be found in the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*), to the maddening religious crank, Miss Clack. Finally, in Sergeant Cuff (with his passion for roses), based on a famous Scotland Yard investigator, Collins created the template for the thorough, unflappable detective who would dominate the genre for decades.

*The Moonstone*, though less febrile and turbulent than *The Woman in White*, continues to hold the reader. T.S. Eliot, who twice wrote extensively about Collins, called it "the first and greatest of English detective novels." And Dorothy Sayers (who should know) called it "probably the very finest detective novel ever written."

Collins—who before he started writing a new book spent months working out, detail by detail, the intricacies of the story—has generally been seen as stronger on plot than on characterization. But what most forcefully grips the reader of *The Woman in White* are its two central and mesmerizing characters—who also mesmerize each other. Count Fosco, the villain, is corpulent, sensual, a tyrant to his wife, ruthless in pursuit of his goals, grotesquely attached to the pet canaries and white mice who run freely over his body, and with an insinuating feminine charm. The heroine is not the passive, pretty Laura Fairlie, victim of Fosco's intrigues, but her older half-sister, Marian Halcombe. When Walter Hartright

National Portrait Gallery, London

first sees Marian across a room he is “struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude.” When she turns toward him and begins to advance,

the easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body...set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, “The lady is dark.” She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, “The lady is young.” She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), “The lady is ugly!”

But Marian—as Walter, and Fosco, and the reader will discover—is resilient and courageous, with a strong mind and a loving heart. Indeed, Fosco himself is powerfully drawn to her, while Marian is both repelled and fascinated by him. “Something transsexual,” Catherine Peters suggests, “is hinted at” between the “feminine” count and the “masculine” Marian (with her famous trace of a mustache), whose appearance, it has been proposed, was modeled in part on George Eliot’s. Marian Halcombe is Collins’s first commanding female character, but her heroism is essentially reactive, prompted by her concern for her endangered sister.

The central character of *No Name*, the book that followed *The Woman in White*, is totally proactive. In the face of disaster, a young and cosseted gentlewoman, Magdalen Vanstone, assumes control of her life, lying, cheating, assuming a false identity—even taking to the stage!—and marrying a man she loathes (who conveniently dies), all in order to regain her situation in society. Her beloved parents, it transpires, had not been able to marry legally until shortly before her father was killed in a train crash and her mother died in childbirth. Whereupon Magdalen and her sister were, under the current laws, labeled illegitimate and brutally thrown upon the world.

Magdalen’s behavior is both heroic and dismaying; we admire her boldness and audacity while nervously acknowledging that her actions border on the criminal, and are certainly far from ladylike. That she prevails—eventually marrying an admirable man who cherishes her strength of mind and purpose—is the first sign we have that Wilkie Collins’s view of morality is radically different from that of his Victorian contemporaries. There is no woman in Dickens remotely like Magdalen Vanstone, and Thackeray’s Becky Sharp is a conniver, not a triumphant woman warrior who can finally gloat:

I am a respectable married woman, accountable to nobody under heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last....[My wickedness] has made Nobody’s Child, Somebody’s Wife.

*No Name* is not only an unsettling drama centered on a powerful woman, it’s also the first of Collins’s agenda novels, in which he challenges Victorian legal and cultural injustices, almost always from a strongly feminist viewpoint, although he firmly resisted

being labeled a feminist. (“He is the most genuinely feminist of all the 19th-century novelists,” wrote Sayers, “because he is the only one capable of seeing women without sexual bias and of respecting them as human individuals in their own right, and not as ‘the ladies, God bless them!’”)

*The Law and the Lady* features a resolute and brave young woman successfully defying convention—and risking her skin—in her determination to remove the stigma of the deplorable Scottish verdict of “not proven” after her husband’s trial for murdering his first wife (who—spoiler!—had actually committed suicide). *Heart and Science* is a fierce crusade against vivisection. *Man and Wife* has two agendas: it’s an attack both on the confusing and unfair marriage laws and on the “muscular Christianity” of Charles Kingsley and his followers: the heroine, at bay, has been betrayed by the handsome young athletic luminary the world worships. (He’s found out. She’s saved.) *The Evil Genius* takes on divorce and the custody of children. *The Black Robe* is anti-Jesuit. *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves* deal with redeemed, or redeemable, prostitutes. It was novels like these that prompted Swinburne’s much-invoked couplet, “What brought good Wilkie’s genius nigh perdition?/Some demon whispered—‘Wilkie! have a mission.’”

Not only did Collins’s novels grow less convincing as they grew more missionary, but their melodrama grew coarser as he more and more frequently conceived them in relation to potential stage adaptations—his passion for the theater was lifelong. But he could be unconvincing even without an agenda on his mind, or a dramatization in view. *Poor Miss Finch*, written soon after *The Moonstone*, has a crackpot plot involving a rich blind girl who despite her blindness has an unconquerable aversion to the color blue; her doting suitor, Oscar, who turns blue from a medical procedure; and his identical-twin brother, Nugent, who also falls in love with Miss Finch. (He intrigues to marry her in place of his blue brother but—defeated and remorseful—dies on a polar expedition, “found dead,” as Ruskin put it, “with his hands dropped off, in the Arctic regions.”)

I can confirm that *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* remain irresistible, and that the other two Collins novels that can still be read with considerable pleasure are those that came between them: *No Name* and *Armada*, his longest and most extravagantly plotted book. (T.S. Eliot wrote that *Armada* “has no merit beyond melodrama, and it has every merit that melodrama can have.”)

Peter Ackroyd, however, repudiates the idea that the great majority of Collins’s novels are without real value. “All of his work remains powerful and

ingenious, striking and persuasive,” he sums up. “It is true that his later novels are no longer widely read, but modern taste is not impeccable.” Can he and I have read the same thirty novels? This is Ackroyd at his most provocative and least plausible, comparable to the near-fanatic insistence—which mars his magisterial biography of Dickens—that, despite both the evidence and common sense, Dickens never consummated his years-long liaison with Ellen Ternan.\*

The hard truth is that if Collins had not written his four major novels, no one today, with or without impeccable taste, would have heard of him. His

Peters’s and Ackroyd’s, ranging from general biographies (*The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*; *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation*) to specialist academic literature (*Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety*; *Wilkie Collins’s American Tour*). But it’s not only Collins’s achievement that has fascinated so many writers. It’s also the complicated, almost brazenly unconventional life he chose to lead—and that he got away with.

His father, William Collins, through heroic diligence rather than extraordinary talent, became one of England’s most successful painters. He was a benign and loving parent, though some-

what strict and relentlessly narrow-minded in religious matters. (He “would not shake hands with a Unitarian”!) And he adored his wife, Harriet, a clever, fun-loving, sociable woman of relatively good birth who had once worked as a governess. After her husband’s death she remained the central figure in the lives of her two sons, who made their official home with her well into their adulthood.

But Wilkie was also out on the town. After a desultory dip into the legal profession—disappointing his father, who had hoped he would go into the church—he flirted with painting but soon realized that what he wanted to do was write. Soon enough, when he was only twenty-four, he published a very well-received two-volume biography of his father that launched him into the London literary world. At the same time he was launching himself into the life of a young voluptuary, having (he boasted to Dickens) enjoyed his first sexual adventure with a much older woman when he was thirteen or so while the family was living temporarily in Italy. Was it true?

Certainly Wilkie admired women, pursued women, and succeeded with women, despite the fact that he was physically unprepossessing—quite short and (writes Catherine Peters) “oddly disproportioned, with a bulging forehead, head too large for his body, short arms and legs and ‘pretty little hands and feet, very like a woman’s.’” It was his charm and vivacity that attracted women to him, plus their appreciation of how much he appreciated them.

His unembarrassed sexual activity—to one correspondent he wrote, “I have had between 40 and 50 years Experience of women of all sorts and sizes”—was one of the many things about him that appealed to Dickens, who was not only twelve years older than he was but, publicly, far more straitlaced. The aggressively domestic Dickens relished adventuring with Wilkie both on their long nighttime traipses through the slums of London and on their stays together in Paris, where lads could be lads, even though Dickens was a lad with ten children. The relationship between the two men was crucial for Wilkie—Dickens would become men-



John Everett Millais: *The Somnambulist*, 1871

minor books are far inferior not only to the Big Four but to a number of other sensation novels of the day: Mrs. Bradon’s wildly successful *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, for instance; even Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*. Whereas within the ten-year span of his finest work, he was a major force in British fiction, remaining highly popular until the end of his life. That is enough to justify a biographer of Ackroyd’s stature devoting a book to him.

Writing about Collins in the late 1920s, Eliot complained that there was no “adequate biography” of him. Since then, as *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* have stubbornly refused to go away, the literature on him has swelled, and today there are at least a dozen substantial books, apart from

\*See my article on Dickens in these pages, June 10, 2010.

tor, intimate friend, collaborator (they wrote plays and fiction together), boss (when Wilkie worked as well as wrote for *All the Year Round*), and publisher. They also became related by marriage, when Wilkie's artist brother, Charley, whom he loved deeply, married Kate Dickens, her father's favorite child.

The marriage was a disaster: Charley was physically fragile and sexually ambivalent, if not asexual, and Dickens came to despise him. This did not help the Dickens–Collins friendship: Wilkie, always fiercely protective of his younger brother, began distancing himself from The Inimitable, and when Dickens died suddenly in 1870, at the age of fifty-eight, Wilkie took the death coolly. (He was certainly cool in his description of the unfinished *Edwin Drood* as “Dickens's last laboured effort, the melancholy work of a worn-out brain.”)

The death he had not taken coolly was that of his mother, which had occurred two years earlier while he was struggling to finish *The Moonstone* and suffering agonies from the rheumatic gout that tormented him throughout his adult life. He was in his mid-forties when Harriet died, and again and again, through the following years, he would refer to her death as “the greatest sorrow” of his life. She had moved out of London sometime before dying, but by this time he had a home of his own—two homes, in fact, and two “wives.”

Almost all the major Victorian novelists had irregular private lives. (Trollope was the great exception: he lived, apparently happily, with his wife until he died, and we know almost nothing about her.) Bulwer-Lytton so hated his wife that he once had her confined to a lunatic asylum. Thackeray's wife, depressed and suicidal, spent most of her life in an institution. George Eliot lived in solemn sin with the married George Henry Lewes, whom, due to the complicated divorce laws, she couldn't marry. About Dickens's double life and wreck of a marriage we now know a great deal.

But Wilkie Collins was violently opposed to marriage, so that his double life was both more and less scandalous than the others. He simply practiced what amounted to legal bigamy, setting up two women in separate establishments, each knowing about the other and known about (and known to) his friends. To his male friends, that is: neither Caroline Graves, who lived with him on and off for more than thirty years, nor Martha Rudd, who came along later and bore him three children, could be acknowledged by the ladies of his acquaintance, beginning with his mother. Harriet Collins had simply refused to acknowledge the existence of Caroline, a respectable and intelligent lower-class woman who acted as Wilkie's hostess, dined out and traveled with him, and was a recognized and constant part of his life—more a common-law wife than a disreputable mistress, as Catherine Peters puts it.

When they met, Caroline was a widow with a young child whom Wilkie raised, educated, and loved. In later years, this girl, Carrie, functioned as his secretary—he even dictated parts of his later novels to her—and he gave her in marriage to a young attorney whom he then (disastrously) employed.

Wilkie spoke of Carrie as his adopted daughter, and she and her children remained central to his life.

The most dramatic story told about Wilkie has to do with his first encounter with Caroline Graves. Supposedly, he, Charley, and their great friend the artist John Everett Millais were walking through the streets late one night when a woman—dressed, of course, in white—darted out of a house in terror and fled into the dark. Wilkie, consumed with curiosity, followed her and claimed her.

This story, so conveniently reflecting the opening of *The Woman in White*, seems to have no basis in fact—it was spun by Millais's son years after all the players in the drama were dead. More prosaically, it appears that when she and Wilkie met, Caroline was running

a small marine shop near where the Collins family lived.

The origins of Martha Rudd are equally obscure. The daughter of a shepherd, she came from a small fishing village in Norfolk, where Wilkie often spent time sailing, and where he discovered her and attached her to himself, again for life. (It's also been suggested that he came upon her when she was working as a housemaid in his mother's home—to me, a more plausible story.) Martha was an attractive young woman, modest, capable, and practical, who seems not to have minded her irregular situation—no doubt she saw it as a big step up in the world: a good man, a famous man, security, affection. Certainly Wilkie treated her generously, lived with her—often under an assumed name—

when he wasn't living with Caroline, and loved their children.

Although the two “wives” probably never met, Martha's children mingled happily with Caroline and with Carrie's children, and they were all treated equally and fairly in Wilkie's will. After Wilkie died, Ackroyd tells us, Caroline “took care of the grave at Kensal Green until her own death in 1895 placed her in the same earth. Martha Rudd then tended the grave until her death in 1919.” So who are we to bridle at these unusual arrangements?

Wilkie's openly unorthodox domestic life, his peculiar appearance (“flamboyant...eccentric rather than dandyish”), and his championship of unpopular causes in his novels all went



to sustain what Peters calls his “more or less conscious decision to be not quite a gentleman.” But none of this had a negative effect on those who knew him. He had to an abundant degree the gift of being loved—by colleagues and friends, by men and women, by young and old. Nina Lehmann, a superb pianist and for decades with her husband at the center of London artistic life, said of him and the twenty years of what she called their “steady friendship”: “always the same, always kind, always

earnest, always interested, always true, always loving and faithful.... I value my Wilkie and I love him dearly.” Her son, Rudy, reminisced about “our dear old Wilkie Collins, the kindest and best friend that boy or man ever had.” Even George Eliot was conquered, remarking on “a sturdy uprightness about him that makes all opinion and all occupation respectable.”

When Wilkie died, in 1889, at the age of sixty-five, his health had entirely given way from the combination

of his agonizing arthritic gout and the immense amount of laudanum (a liquid tincture of opium) that he had taken through the years to combat the pain. He was unable to finish his final novel (his friend Walter Besant did it for him), and one feels he was surprised that he had survived as long as he had. He had no reason, however, to regret his life—he had successfully flouted convention, was fulfilled sexually and emotionally, and had enjoyed an immensely successful and well-

rewarded career from start to finish.

Of course we recognize the limits of his accomplishment—Dickens, wrote T. S. Eliot, is “separated from Collins by the difference between pure unaccountable genius and pure consummate talent.” But to be mentioned in the same breath with Dickens is a remarkable tribute. As Dorothy Sayers put it, “When we have said that he cannot equal the giants of his age, the fact remains that it is with giants that we compare him.” □

## Where Globalization Began?

Colin Thubron

### Island People: The Caribbean and the World

by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro.  
Knopf, 451 pp., \$28.95

In his travel book *The Middle Passage* (1962), V. S. Naipaul notoriously claimed that “history is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies.” Ironically the provocation in this statement was a display of typically Trinidadian *picing*, or goading insult; but the dyspeptic Nobel laureate was probably being serious.

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, in his *Island People: The Caribbean and the World*, moves to an opposite extreme. The Caribbean, he suggests—in its racial mix, historic deracination, and even its transcontinental trade—is the place where globalization began, along with “the West’s still-ongoing conversation about universal human rights.” The region, to him, and to a growing body of historians, is a precocious paradigm of the modern situation, and its supposed marginality as a tourist paradise (despite broken economies and ingrained corruption) is an illusion.

While surveying the cultural history and impact of the major Caribbean islands, Jelly-Schapiro tacitly repudiates Naipaul’s conventional view of history (while still admiring his mental acumen). *Island People* is a creative hybrid of travel writing and in-depth reportage, embracing islands as diverse as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Martinique; but its author’s guiding mentor is announced from the start. He is another Trinidadian, the trenchant historian C. L. R. James, a grandson of slaves, who died in 1989 but whose work remains influential in postcolonial studies.

In linking Fidel Castro’s Cuban revolution with the Haitian black rebellion of 160 years earlier—the only successful slave revolt—James sounded a clarion call for individual human rights, and envisaged a unified Caribbean experience and culture. Its human society, he claimed, was unique:

Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern. It is an original pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of that word, but West Indian, *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else.



Young Cubans crossing the Malecón as tourists drive by in antique American convertibles, Havana, May 2016

Jelly-Schapiro endorses this view. The sheer numbers of Caribbean slaves, he writes—some six million within three centuries—exceeded by over ten times those arriving in North America. This giant workforce, laboring above all on sugar cane, was instrumental in the financial and industrial rise of Europe. But that is not Jelly-Schapiro’s concern. The export goods he celebrates are ideas and culture. For the past half-century or more, he writes, this unique creole society, with its intrinsic rootlessness, has above all given the world a stupendous charge of music.

It is here that Jelly-Schapiro comes into his own. His political commentary and history, ample though they often are, pale before his fascination with the Caribbean soundscape. His chapters on Jamaica celebrate ska and reggae; those on Cuba echo with early *son cubano*, cha-cha-cha, mambo, and salsa; the Dominican Republic with *bachata*; Trinidad with calypso and steelpan drumming. Intermittently he traces their effects to the urban centers of the West and to street carnivals.

His obsession began in a way conventional to his generation in the 1990s, when college students were still sticking up posters of Bob Marley (along with Che Guevara) in their dorms as “an icon of racial justice and wry romance.” He writes:

I had by then developed an inchoate sense that would soon become

a conviction: that it was in the Caribbean that many of the salient characteristics of the Americas at large—traumatic histories of colonialism and genocide and slavery; migration and creolization as facts of life; the persistent sense of cosmopolitan possibility and newness inherent to a New World—were brought into starkest relief.

Some twenty years of study and specialized journalism have preceded this book. Its balance of skepticism and enthusiasm is driven by both wide knowledge and a bracing sympathy for the oppressed. Jelly-Schapiro’s scorn is reserved for the wealthy and for the unthinking tourist. He favors poverty-stricken Haiti over its neighboring Dominican Republic, and loves crime-ridden Trinidad. The old regime of Cuba, with its Communist-inspired equality, incurs his nostalgic respect, while he derides the golf-club complacency of Barbados as that of a hypocritical Little England, grown from one of the cruelest slave-owning regimes in the Antilles.

This alignment with the downtrodden accords with Jelly-Schapiro’s insistence on the centrality of music. In much Caribbean music—in its yearning, in its incipient displacement and rebellion—the voice of the oppressed sounds clear. Almost by definition, it is subversive. When the Jamaican government tries to commandeer its heritage of reggae to promote “Brand Jamaica” and the interests of commerce, Jelly-

Schapiro is quietly disdainful. Government ministers are not the cure, he insists, but the problem. The ghetto districts of Kingston, which “supply both their power and their shame,” are beyond their regulation. In the formal grounds of Emancipation Park, he witnesses an insipid showcase in which the minister of youth and culture—a former Miss World—presides over a primarily irrelevant display of awards and dancing.

It is to Jamaica that Jelly-Schapiro devotes almost one quarter of his book, above all to the “weary, wary city” of Kingston and the music at its heart. The capital is grimmer and more violent now than when the British travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, in his *The Traveller’s Tree: A Journey through the Caribbean Islands*, wrote that even the city center was as squalid as the dreariest London outskirts. That was in 1948, before the florescence of the music that captivates Jelly-Schapiro. In the 1960s, from a complex ancestry that included local genres and New Orleans jazz, reggae was born and reached its apogee in the dynamic trio the Wailers, whose transcendent star was Bob Marley.

Jelly-Schapiro traveled among the aging producers, relatives, and Rastafarian acolytes of this diverse trinity: Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Livingston. Marley and Tosh were both dead, but he visited the pilgrimage sites that are their graves. Tosh had been angrier and more demanding than Marley. Some Jamaicans regard him as a truer (but less exportable) son of his country. In a telling double portrait, Jelly-Schapiro calls these two the equivalents of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X:

One an inspired conciliator with a prophet’s smile (never mind how key the juxtaposition of “screw-face” scowl and lover’s grin were to Bob’s appeal); the other an icon of black rage, glowering behind dark glasses (never mind the goofy strain central to Peter’s manner and hits).

Peter Tosh, murdered at the age of forty-two, lies in a concrete chamber in a sleepy village by the sea. Marley, dead from cancer at thirty-six, was brought back to his birthplace in the dusty hamlet of Nine Mile, where his grave has become part of the tourist circuit. It is a modest, informal site, bright with Rasta colors. Marley’s mother, apparently,

started to dream that her son's coffin had been buried facing the wrong direction (a devout Rasta must face the sunrise), and rumors on the island supported her concern. The assiduous Jelly-Schapiro runs to earth the man who rectified this: Bongo Joe, who secretly dug into the mausoleum under the supervision of Marley's mother and brother and an Ethiopian Orthodox priest.

Tireless in his exploration, Jelly-Schapiro catches the eccentric survivor of the Wailers, Bunny Livingston, singing among Rasta pilgrims at Tosh's grave; he hears the legendary Toots Hibbert performing at a book launch in a modeling agency; back in New York, he talks with Harry Belafonte (whose calypso he labels ersatz). Back in Jamaica, he interviews the entrepreneur Chris Blackwell, "the man once responsible for bringing Jamaican music to the world," in his ocean eyrie GoldenEye, the former home of Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond.

Jelly-Schapiro's musical obsession supplies both *Island People's* strength and its imbalance. Its author's expertise is patent, but the Caribbean soundscape's multiple styles and personalities sometimes become wearing, and Jelly-Schapiro's writing can grow clotted with convoluted syntax and knowing references.

At its best his passion is infectious, and a reticent skepticism permeates his book, while leaving its freshness intact. He has a journalist's flair for interviews and is as deft with chance encounters as with pop idols. Above all he finds dignity as well as excitement in this beautiful archipelago.

But the beauty comes at a cost. Most travelers treat the Caribbean as a luxury to be consumed. Its corrupt politics, crime, and dire economies are too easily subsumed by a travel-brochure mirage of aquamarine seas and rum-drunk carnivals. There is a profound discomfort here. The beach compounds of package tourism are often insulated from the island interior by concrete walls and barbed wire, and the only native whom vacationers may meet is the man who mixes their daiquiris or sidles up to sell marijuana.

Yet the independence of many of these island nations occurred within living memory. Their culture developed around the ingrained notion of white superiority. And white people are back, still wealthy and superior, expecting to be pampered on beaches and cruise tours by those who may resent them. As the Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid put it in her book *A Small Place*:

[The natives] are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go—so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.

V. S. Naipaul bluntly labeled this a new slavery.

An exception to this servitude was Cuba. Only with the collapse of the

Soviet Union, which once bankrolled the Cuban economy, did Fidel Castro reluctantly recant his hatred of tourism. Even then entry was hard for the lone US citizen, although it is becoming easier now that the US and Cuba have established diplomatic relations. But Jelly-Schapiro (a white New Englander) received a year's fellowship in Havana in 1991, and his delight spills onto the page in three full chapters of *Island People*.

He loves Havana for its run-down Hispanic glamour, its vivid colors, its street banter, its people larger than life. It is a city to walk in. Old Havana has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1982, but revolutionary placards still displace commercial advertisements. The alleys may be nearly empty of traffic, the haunt of old dominoes

players and children, but they empty into streets magnificent with crumbling balconies and porticoes, threaded by ancient taxis.

The elusive concept of *cubanidad* thrives here. Cubanness is social, dynamic, and earthy. It smells of garlic and rum. And then there is the music. Jelly-Schapiro traces its myriad strands from French line dances and quadrilles (imported from Saint-Domingue) to bolero, cha-cha-cha, and the rhythms of Cuban slaves. Then comes *son cubano*, the conga, rumba, mambo, and salsa. In part this proliferation owes its energy to a quirk of Spanish colonialism:

Cuba was an island where slaves were always allowed to keep and play their drums—big open-ended cylindrical ones from Congo,

conical *ekpe* ones from Calabar, hourglass-shaped *batás* from Yorubaland. Drumming was a source, for people from those places, of both social and spiritual health. And beyond the policy of allowing drums, the island's Spanish owners tolerated a more institutional form of cultural preservation and communal power.

This institution was the black *cabildo*, the fraternal order that nurtured music and carnival, and brought together people originating from the same region of Africa. Even today,

and especially in the countryside, it's anything but rare to meet a black Cuban who can tell with exactitude and feeling just where on

the continent—based on the *batás* her uncle keeps, or the particular *regla* of deities followed by his mom—her people came from. The cabildos are a big reason why.

They partly account too for the survival of African beliefs in the syncretic faiths that flourish, sometimes behind closed doors, throughout the island. African deities have merged with Christian saints to produce powerful intercessors condoned by the church, while practitioners of *regla de palo* gather spirit-bundles to protect petitioners' homes. The sect of Abakuá, which descends from the feared leopard society of Calabar, still practices secret rites that originated as a form of resistance to slavery.

None of these practices, of course, involves many white Hispanic Cubans, whose dominance is an unspoken feature of political life. Racial discrimination in Cuba was officially banned by Castro. Even its discussion went underground. It is intrinsic to the myth of the revolution that all Cuba's citizens are equal, and the Communist legacy remains in free education, free health care, and greater material equality than anywhere else in Latin America. "No Cuban child," it is said, "sleeps in the streets."

Over three decades Cuba's cold war status as a beacon of revolution and a model for the unaligned third world partly obscured its domestic tyranny, an oppression only slowly lifting now. Castro's intimation in his rambling 1961 "Words to the Intellectuals" speech—that no honest writer would be harassed—soon darkened into repres-

sion. Jelly-Schapiro cites the case of the black Cuban writer Carlos Moore, who agitated against race prejudice and fled Cuba in fear of his life. There were many more (unmentioned by Jelly-Schapiro). Guillermo Cabrera Infante, author of the extraordinary novel *Tres Tristes Tigres*, fled abroad in 1965, and his implacable contempt for Castro's rule was lifelong. Reinaldo Arenas, abandoning a regime hostile to homosexuals, died wretchedly in exile. Most prominent in its day was the cause célèbre of the poet Heberto Padilla, whose imprisonment and forced confession in 1971 echoed Soviet persecution, and whose memoir *Self-Portrait of the Other*, published in exile, was a devastating lament for creative freedom.

The sheer number and diversity of states in the Caribbean archipelago make any comprehensive survey all but impossible, and Jelly-Schapiro does not attempt one (nor does his book contain an index or a legible map). In the second half of *Island People* he follows a haphazard course through the Lesser Antilles, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.

He gives short shrift to the tamer and more tourist-ridden islands. Cayman receives only a few diary-style pages. Barbados is described as a faux-genteel ex-colony of Britain. Antigua profits from offshore banking and tourism. St. Lucia he ignores entirely.

Montserrat, on the other hand, evokes a gentler response. In 1989 the island was struck by a hurricane that left 90 percent of its residents homeless. Six years later its southern volcano became

active, displacing half of the island's inhabitants. Some went abroad. Others moved eventually to newly built houses that could not replicate the social structure traditional to this beautiful island: a family compound—the "matrifocal yard"—ruled by its senior woman.

Lying at the boundary of two tectonic plates, the scattered archipelago of the Lesser Antilles is especially vulnerable. Martinique, most populous of the old French colonial islands, was devastated when a volcanic eruption hit its capital, Saint-Pierre, in 1902. Within three minutes "the Paris of the Caribbean," with its 30,000 inhabitants, vanished under ash and molten lava. (The sole survivor was the inmate of the city jail, whose thick walls saved him.) Soon afterward the capital was moved to Fort-de-France.

But the split personality of this African-French island persists. Jelly-Schapiro traces its evolution through the career of its preeminent poet and politician, Aimé Césaire, who first promoted the values of independence and *négritude*, yet fell in love with French literature and settled for the island becoming a *département* of France, which it remains today. In Fort-de-France—the largest city in the French Antilles—the women are more likely to wear Parisian fashions than native skirts. Its people inhabit streets named after French writers and purchase their baguettes and Bordeaux wine in euros; and country roads may be subsumed by spandex-clad racing cyclists as if the Tour de France had deviated westward.

Martinique was the birthplace, too, of Frantz Fanon, the revolutionary hero of Algerian independence, whose work remains powerfully influential, and for whom Jelly-Schapiro has a deep, if nuanced, regard. He travels to Fanon's obscure childhood village in Martinique. Likewise he is cautiously sympathetic to the revolution in Grenada, cut short by an American invasion in 1983. He interviews a smooth-talking ex-minister, recently freed from twenty-six years in prison, whose part in the death of the short-lived revolution's leader, Maurice Bishop, he deftly leaves ambiguous.

The United States' takeover of Puerto Rico after 1898 Jelly-Schapiro mercilessly exposes for its greed, venality, and occasional violence. By the 1930s the spread of sugar plantations had turned rural farmers into cane workers earning seventy-five cents for a twelve-hour day. (It is a latter-day irony that their enormous sugar exports were probably undermining the health, as well as rotting the teeth, of their colonizers.) The workers found a champion in the lawyer and politician Albizu Campos, who refused the bribes of big business and was swiftly jailed for sedition. But after police killed nineteen civilians during a peaceful march of his supporters, Washington sought a new approach. Under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jelly-Schapiro writes,

the way was paved for the island to elect its own governor—and perhaps to gain its full autonomy from the U.S. But sadly for Puerto Rico, the patriotic figure whose integrity and patriotic gifts perhaps made him the man most qualified to guide the island through those years was festering in a Georgia jail. The job, instead of going to Albizu Campos, went to the man who became his nemesis.

This was Luis Muñoz Marín, a turncoat from Puerto Rican independence, whose toadying to the United States and modernizing of his country made him at least as popular as Albizu. Today there are streets and institutes named for Albizu, and others for Muñoz Marín (as well as an international airport); martyrdom and compromise running neck-and-neck.

The starkest geographical divide between postcolonial government and black rebellion lies on Hispaniola, the island where the Dominican Republic and Haiti abut one another. Jelly-Schapiro's sympathies, of course, go to Haiti, and above all to the expatriate Haitians laboring on Dominican sugar plantations, half a million of whom are threatened with deportation, despite having lived and worked there for many years. In its myth of racial homogeneity—the notion that its people are not black at all, but native Indian—the Dominican Republic is perhaps more repellent to Jelly-Schapiro than any other Caribbean state. It is a country, he writes, that "often feels like it's built around the coarser aspects of masculinity."

The Republic has the largest economy in the region, in contrast to its impoverished Haitian neighbor. But it was Haiti, under Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, that witnessed the only successful black slave revolt in history. Returning to the work of C. L. R. James, Jelly-Schapiro writes:

It's only over the past couple of decades, fully two centuries after the Haitian Revolution, that a critical mass of historians has caught up to James's argument that what happened... wasn't merely central to the rise of global capitalism but birthed a question that's still at the core of our politics now: How universal, really, are universal rights?

The assertion and the question are taken no further.

Perhaps fittingly, *Island People* concludes at the southern reach of the Antilles, in Trinidad, home to the visual arts and carnival and supported by the corruption of petrodollars, a tiny country that turned its fifty-five-gallon oil barrels into "the only acoustic instrument invented in the twentieth century": steelpan drums. It was the reluctantly acknowledged birthplace, too, of V. S. Naipaul, whose acerbic voice rises like a warning throughout these pages.

Literature, in fact, although a poor second to music, sounds here in varied lives and voices. There are notable passages on Jamaica Kincaid and a fascinating study of the reclusive Jean Rhys, the lushness and disquiet of whose Dominican childhood pervade her classic novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. But the two writers who surface most often throughout *Island People*—V. S. Naipaul and Patrick Leigh Fermor—are very different, even from one another: the first skeptical and penetrating, the second warmly inquisitive. Jelly-Schapiro's book, however uneven its writing, partakes in both of their qualities: rich in its enthusiasms, but tempered by the author's own urbane intelligence. □



# The Art of Difference

Hilton Als

## Diane Arbus:

### In the Beginning

an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, July 12–November 27, 2016; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, January 21–April 30, 2017. Catalog of the exhibition by Jeff L. Rosenheim. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 269 pp., \$50.00 (distributed by Yale University Press)

## Diane Arbus:

### In the Park

an exhibition at Lévy Gorvy Gallery, New York City, May 2–June 24, 2017

## Diane Arbus:

### Portrait of a Photographer

by Arthur Lubow. Ecco, 734 pp., \$17.99 (paper)

## Diane Arbus:

### A Chronology, 1923–1971

by Elisabeth Sussman and Doon Arbus. Aperture, 177 pp., \$29.95 (paper)

In the mid-1990s, when *The New Yorker's* offices were a stone's throw from the main branch of the New York Public Library, I worked down the hall from Joseph Mitchell. The great writer was in his eighties then. It had been decades since he'd published anything, but it was thrilling to discover his old pieces in the bound volumes that lined the magazine's library shelves: back issues made the past feel present. When Mitchell became a staff writer in 1938, he introduced *The New Yorker's* readers to a world I recognized as not too far removed from the Manhattan I knew—a universe peopled by characters in sour barrooms, a bearded lady or two, black men who wore their self-protective reserve like a second suit. Indeed, Mitchell's portraits—snapshots—of outsiders spoke to me of difference in a way that strenuously “queer” literature of the time did not.

The longest conversation I ever had with Mitchell was not about writing, though. It was about the photographer Diane Arbus, and took place around the time *The New Yorker* published my review of *Untitled*, her third posthumous book of photographs. (She died by her own hand in 1971.) Both he and Arbus used the word “freaks” to describe their subjects (a word I found disparaging and objected to, albeit silently in his presence). But Arbus's subjects were unlike Mitchell's: her photographs showed them pursuing their otherness with a fierce velocity that had little in common with his ultimately more assimilated characters, seen through the skin of his elegant and sometimes ironical prose.

Arbus's photographs were elegant, too—classically composed and cool—but they were on fire with what difference looked like and what it felt like as seen through the eyes of a straight Jewish girl whose power lay in her ability to be herself and not herself—different—all at once. The story she told with her camera was about shape-shifting: in order to understand difference one had to not only not dismiss it, but try



Diane Arbus: A young man and his girlfriend with hot dogs in the park, N.Y.C. 1971

to become it. “I don’t like to arrange things,” Arbus once said. “If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.”

When my review of *Untitled* appeared in *The New Yorker* Mitchell stopped me in “our” hall to say that Arbus had first telephoned him in 1960, after she read his work. She wanted to talk about his subjects—the “freaks” that he had described on the page and that she was attempting to describe in her photos. He told Patricia Bosworth for her *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (1984):

I urged Diane not to romanticize freaks. I told her that freaks can be as boring and ordinary as so-called “normal” people. I told her what I found interesting about Olga, the bearded lady, was that she yearned to be a stenographer and kept geraniums on her windowsill.

Mitchell said that Arbus phoned him several times after that first conversation. They would always talk for at least an hour, and he jotted down some of the topics they discussed: Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Walker Evans, Grimms’ Fairy Tales.

While Arbus's genius found its fullest expression in photography, she was also an astute reader and writer whose letters, journals, and other writings deserve space on any serious reader's shelf. She began keeping extensive notebooks at the time she started taking pictures in earnest, in 1956, and much of her available writing is collected in *Diane Arbus: A Chronology* (a treasure trove of a book whose design is vexing: the type is too small). Indeed, a number of her best-known images, ranging from *Russian midjet*

*friends in a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. 1963* to *Hermaphrodite and a dog in a carnival trailer, Md. 1970*, feel like tales of the fantastic—stories she might have been tempted to write down if making images didn't claim her attention first, last, and always.

Still, language was important to Arbus. “Another thing I’ve worked from is reading,” she once said. “It happens very obliquely. I don’t mean I read something and rush out and make a picture of it. And I hate that business of illustrating poems.” But it was the camera that not only gave her license to “go where I’ve never been before” but also, as her more recent biographer Arthur Lubow suggests in his *Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer*, allowed her to be looked at in return, especially after she started using a square-format Rolleiflex, a camera that allowed her to confront more directly those she photographed, since it didn’t obscure her face. She wanted her queer subjects—all those “other” self-created people whom she memorialized in Manhattan, her wrecked, magical city—to see her difference, too.

That difference was something she felt nearly from the beginning. Born in 1923, she was the second child of David and Gertrude Nemerov. (Her brother, Howard, born three years before, would go on to become a noted writer. Her sister, René, an artist, was born in 1928.) Nemerov supported his family as the merchandising director at Russeks, one of the city's leading fur emporia; the company had been founded in the late nineteenth century by Frank Russek, Gertrude's father, along with two of his brothers. Families that go into business with one another often live in a peculiar world defined by power, an uneasy closeness based on trade and profit, and the isolation that can come with wealth.

Throughout her life Arbus was drawn to other closed societies.

In a slide show of her work in 1970 (a Japanese student, unsure of his English, recorded her lecture so he could play it back later), Arbus tells the audience that she grew up “kind of rich,” and when they laugh, she doesn’t laugh with them. Her silence feels like a sign of an injury. But by virtue of the education that her class and money made possible, she was able to articulate in her writing what her difference felt like, while her “freaks” could only display theirs, and hope for the best. Writing to her close friend Marvin Israel in 1960, Arbus said:

I remember the special agony of walking down that center aisle, feeling like the princess of Russek's: simultaneously privileged and doomed. The main floor was always very empty like a church and along the way were poised the leeringest manikins ever whose laps and bosoms were never capacious enough for refuge and all the people bowed slightly and smiled like the obsequies were seasoned with mockeries. It seemed it all belonged to me and I was ashamed.

Another cause for shame or secrecy, perhaps, was Arbus's relationship with her brother: Lubow suggests that it was incestuous, beginning when they were children, cosseted by nannies but emotionally neglected by their beautiful, depressed mother and remote father. He goes on to say that based on material provided by Arbus's therapist, the affair lasted until shortly before her death. Whatever the circumstances, incestuous coupling can be viewed as a kind of twinning—a game you can explore with someone who is you and not you, all at once. Throughout her career Arbus returns, again and again, to that feeling of twinning and difference. It's there in her application in 1971 for an Ingram Merrill grant (she didn't get it):

The sign of a minority is The Difference. Those of birth, accident, choice, belief, predilection, inertia. (Some are irrevocable: people are fat, freckled, handicapped, ethnic, of a certain age, class, attitude, profession, enthusiasm.) Every Difference is a Likeness too.

Like Howard before her, Arbus went to Fieldston, the Riverdale campus of the Ethical Culture School. One classmate recalls that “she came full-blown with her mature privacy intact.” Direct, shy, secretive, and charming, her writing was advanced. A 1940 paper about Chaucer is detailed, questioning, and specific:

Chaucer seems to be very sure and whole and his attitude toward everything is so calm and tender because he was satisfied and glad that he was himself. . . . The pleasure he gets from meeting [people] is part physical, part spiritual. He seems to love physical things, even obscene ones, and from looking at them, he gets a contact with the

other person. His way of looking at everything is like that of a newborn baby; he sees things and each one seems wonderful, not for its significance in relation to other things, but simply because it is unique and because it is there.

Arbus's uniqueness was heralded right away, but the praise disturbed her. During her first years at Fieldston, she met Allan Arbus, who was working in the advertising department at Russeks. (David Nemerov's partner, Max Weinstein, was Allan's uncle by marriage.) Five years Diane's senior, he had dropped out of City College. The two quickly became allies, according to Allan, and began meeting in secret on weekends, vowing to marry. Sometimes they were mistaken for siblings. That he was already a part of her family's professional life when they met, a brother who was not a brother, might have added to his appeal, too.

Still, there was high school to finish and the awful weight that came with being "gifted." At Fieldston, Arbus's literary skills were considered equal to her gifts as a painter. The late screenwriter Stewart Stern, a fellow student, recalled:

When she picked up her brush for the first time she was simply not doing what anybody else did. We were all trying to be representational and she had no interest in that, except as a kind of satire.

For Arbus the question was: What realities does reality represent? And yet she couldn't bear making art that was "art"; like all those Russeks furs, painting belonged to a moneyed class, the world of connoisseurship. Was she talented, she wondered, or was she encouraged to make art because a girl of her background was supposed to? For her senior class assignment, Arbus produced her "Autobiography," in which she wrote:

Everyone suddenly decided I was meant to be an artist and I was given art lessons and a big box of oils and encouragement and everything. I painted and drew every once in a while for 4 yrs. with a teacher without admitting to anyone that I didn't like to paint or draw at all and I didn't know what I was doing. I used to pray and wish often to be a "great artist" and all the while I hated it and I didn't realize that I didn't want to be an artist at all. The horrible thing was that all the encouragement I got made me think that I really wanted to be an artist and made me keep pretending that I liked it and made me like it less and less until I hated it because it wasn't me that was being an artist.

Who was that "me"? Despite her horror of painting—"I remember I hated the smell of the paint and the noise it would make when I put my brush to the paper. Sometimes I wouldn't really look but just listen to this horrible squish squish squish," she told the journalist Studs Terkel—Arbus's teachers thought they were encouraging her true self, or a self she wanted to be. But she knew she was acting, and felt herself a fraud. Like most reasonably self-aware,

polite, socially adept young girls of the time, Arbus might have considered herself the problem when, in fact, what she was really questioning was the world's authenticity, which turns equally on the fake and the real.

This was the 1940s and she was a girl and even though power belonged to the world of men, there were questions. What if she was smarter and more talented than Howard? Than Allan? Than her father, who loved the Impressionists and became a Sunday painter because he wanted to, and could? What would that make her? Howard's son

person of such expectations, like going to the school of your own mind twenty-four hours a day.<sup>1</sup>

Arbus's search for real feeling—she suffered from manic depression her entire life, just as her mother had before her—was not an unintelligent reaction to the closed society she had grown up in, one that placed a great deal of importance on appearances, and the silences that permeate decorum. Arbus could rail against all that fakery in photography, and in her writing, without disturbing her sitters' shell of secrecy,



Diane Arbus: Woman with white gloves and a pocket book, N.Y.C. 1956

Alexander Nemerov—he never met his aunt—saw what Diane Arbus no doubt tried to hide but could not:

Arbus had the courage not only to bend photography over backward but to bend her own written eloquence backward, too.... The world for my father responded only to his intelligence.... Arbus, by contrast, could see the world as it was without her. She simply gave it the chance to be as it was. What she saw, in one sense, was the ardency and joy of a world relieved of the burden—this is how I would put it—of having to be intelligent for her, of having thereby to mirror her own intelligence, of being required to give that intelligence back to her in a genuine way, ever-present, all the time, that must have been exhausting to the

of being known only to themselves—and then to her. Together, they would tell the truth while sending up the "hierarchy" of art, the world her parents inhabited, and that Howard followed them into. (His 1965 book, *Journal of the Fictive Life*, is, in part, a condemnation of photography as a form of pornography. Alexander Nemerov recalls his father holding one of Arbus's most famous images, *Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1966*, the only one of her pictures he had, like something that stank.)

*A naked man being a woman N.Y.C. 1968*, for example, is a kind of joke on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. In the picture a naked man stands center frame. His genitals are tucked between

<sup>1</sup>Alexander Nemerov, *Silent Dialogues: Diane Arbus and Howard Nemerov* (Fraenkel Gallery, 2015), p. 92.

his upper thighs. His left hand rests sweetly on his left hip; his right hand on his right thigh. His right foot is arched. The manufactured pudendum, the powdered face and penciled eyebrows and rouged lips do not obscure his "real" self—his wide, shaved chest, his long male feet—but add to the reality of his dream of a self, being-as-a-wish. Arbus wanted in on that deeply private exchange with the self. "I have learned to get past the door, from the outside to the inside," she wrote in a fellowship application in 1964. "I want to be able to follow."

It took Arbus a long time to become Arbus. Shortly after her marriage to Allan in 1941, they began collaborating on fashion photography. (They had two children, in 1945 and 1954.) Their first client was Russeks—more family business. Arbus styled the shoots and Allan, always more technically adept, shot the photographs. By 1956 Arbus decided she had to end her collaboration with Allan or lose her mind.

She marked her transition from commercial photographer to artist when she began studying with Lisette Model. Born in Vienna in 1901, Model, like Arbus, had grown up rich—a world she rejected in her black-and-white pictures, in which one feels the spiritual fatigue or complacency behind the idle and pampered. What Arbus needed from Model was her permission to be herself, as a photographer. Model recalls:

I said, "Originality means coming from the source...." And from there on, Diane was sitting there and—I've never in my life seen anybody—not listening to me but suddenly listening to herself through what was said.

Arbus's first 35-millimeter images were, she remembered in a class she taught in 1971, "very grainy things. I'd be fascinated by what the grain did because it would make a kind of tapestry of all these little dots and everything would be translated into this medium of dots." She did not like being a painter, but she could certainly see and speak in the language of one. The photographs in the exhibition "In the Beginning" at the Met Breuer last fall, curated by Jeff Rosenheim, began in 1956 when Arbus was making those dots more specific. These pictures are important to our understanding of her work: despite the fact that many of them might qualify as street photography, they're markedly different from those of her contemporaries—Sid Grossman, Saul Leiter. They are not about Manhattan as a clichéd swirl of taxis and people but, instead, the city as a hitherto unseen terrain containing faces and bodies and most importantly souls that haunt it at odd angles and on empty streets.

At the same time Arbus was working those dots out. Looking at the prints at the Met Breuer (early on Arbus used the popular and lightweight Leica; Rosenheim's show ends in 1962, when she switched to the Rolleiflex) was like reading draft after draft of a first great poem as it comes into focus: you know that once the writer finishes it, that poem will be the bridge to other great poems. Arbus knew her apprentice work was pivotal to clarifying what she needed to say with the camera:

But when I'd been working for a while with these dots, I suddenly wanted terribly to get through there. I wanted to see the real differences between things. I'm not talking about textures. I really hate that, the idea that a picture can be interesting simply because it shows texture.... It really bores the hell out of me. But I wanted to see the difference between flesh and material, the densities of different kinds of things: air and water and shiny.

Whatever her tools, Arbus generally recognized what she wanted to photograph—people and relationships that were queer, or that queered our idea of the “normal.” Arbus was particularly attuned to postures that connote shame, the horror of avoidance as played out by so-called normal-looking people. In a picture like *Woman with white gloves and a pocket book*, N.Y.C. 1956, the figure looks slightly rattled, as if recoiling from the memory of an emotional pummeling that nevertheless, and miraculously, left hair and makeup in place (see illustration on page 32). The same year, Arbus took a picture titled *Mother contemplating her toddler*, N.Y.C., in which a hefty mother in her winter coat looks at her offspring with nothing approaching maternal concern. It's as though she can't decide if he's a bad dream, or why he isn't a dream, and Arbus captures this complication in the most primal of relationships.

Those two feel like a curtain raiser to the devastating *Woman and her son*, N.Y.C. 1965, in “Diane Arbus: In the Park” at Lévy Gorvy Gallery. In this image, the two figures are physically similar: the boy is overweight, the better to be “like” his mother—or to withstand her psychological weight, the mouth that keeps going, even during the sitting. Both mother and child pictures feature the drama of interaction no matter how distanced or cruel: the story couldn't happen without that tormented or tormenting other.

As Arbus went on, though, she became more and more interested in the drama of the self as it appeared not only to her through her lens (her magic portal) but to her subject. No visual artist of the twentieth century has described with more accuracy the enormous pride her characters, certainly in the early pictures, feel at having risked all to become themselves—selves they could not lock up, or hide, or resist being recorded despite the pain of being marginalized in their daily life.

In *A very thin man in Central Park*, N.Y.C. 1961, in the Lévy Gorvy show, the subject resembles an elongated Raymond Massey; he has a movie star's interest in his effect—his verticality of form, his costuming, the spats that emphasize the thinness of his legs, a “defect” that no doubt contributes to his unblinking pleasure in his own self-worth. And because he's proud of his look, he's interested in his effect—his power as, potentially, an erotic object. The picture is a record of a come-on—what can he give Arbus in exchange for her having been interested in him? His mouth is slightly open with the questions, with desire.

Arbus once said that when she went to photograph someone she heard herself saying, “How terrific,” and there's this woman making a face.” She continued:

I really mean it's terrific. I don't mean I wish I looked like that. I don't mean I wish my children looked like that. I don't mean in my private life I want to kiss you. But I mean that's amazingly, undeniably, something. There are always two things that happen. One is recognition and the other is that it's totally peculiar. But there's some sense in which I always identify with them.

The Lévy Gorvy show helps open up just how much the Rolleiflex expanded Arbus's view. It's like going from a 16-millimeter screen to Vistavision: the enlarged format allows her to take in her subjects' surrounding worlds. In early pictures she took with the new camera, such as *Lillian and Dorothy Gish in Central Park*, N.Y.C. 1964, the actresses are huddled against not only the cold but against the white loneliness of the surrounding landscape, a landscape redolent of the frozen wastes Lillian struggled to survive in the silent film *Way Down East* (1920), except the east now is not Maine but New York in winter.

Unlike Garry Winogrand or Robert Frank, Arbus made pictures that grew out of and described the loneliness we are all taught to be ashamed of and should try to “fix” through conventional connections—marriage, children, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Arbus's “I”—the eye behind her camera—was unabashed loneliness, looking to connect, if only because she understood what it felt like not to. She wanted to see the world whole, which meant seeing and accepting the fractures in those connections, too, along with all that could not be fixed. When she started taking pictures of drag queens and interracial couples, homosexuality was illegal, and miscegenation was still met with violence or derision.

While the figures in the Lévy Gorvy show sometimes look like creatures you'd expect to find at night, all of the photos were taken during the day when Arbus trolled for subjects in Washington Square Park and Central Park. That only adds to their boldness—and surreality. What world is this? A world we turn away from as we jog and cycle through leaf-dappled public spaces, ignoring our mortality or troubled self as it takes form in that madwoman's eyes or those depressed kids holding hot dogs. About her work in Washington Square Park, Arbus once recalled:

I could become a million things. But I could never become that, whatever all those people were. There were days I just couldn't work there, and then there were days I could.... I hung around a lot. They were a lot like sculptures

in a funny way. I was very keen to get close to them, so I had to ask to photograph them. You can't get that close to somebody and not say a word, although I have done that.

The former painter was never far from the photographer.

Once, while working with Model, Arbus said she was ashamed of what she saw—that it was evil. Her elder daughter and executor, Doon, took exception to this, writing in 1972:

I think what she meant was not that it was evil, but that it was forbidden, that it had always been too dangerous, too frightening, or too ugly for anyone else to look on. She was determined to reveal what others had been taught to turn their backs on. As far as I know, it was her first description of the territories she wanted to make her own, those that would attest to her daring.

Arbus's daring separated her from Joseph Mitchell, in the end. When it was revealed after his death that he had put some if not a lot of fiction into his later journalism, my first thought was less about the nagging contemporary issue of “truthiness” than about Arbus. Some journalists make things up when they're naturally reticent, tired, and can no longer bear to do the journalist's essential work, which is to listen to one's subject. I cannot say why Mitchell relied on his imagination more and more as his career went on, but perhaps he felt he needed his imagination to

help round his stories out. Maybe he got tired of listening to what other people had to say, but was too afraid to rely on his own voice to write fiction.

Arbus did not have to make her subjects up. And she never tired of listening. As Doon Arbus points out in her 1972 piece, her mother told her subjects things she never told her friends or family; a sitting was also an exchange of secrets. Just as her diary entries and letters often describe a life in flux—the girl becoming a woman, the novice becoming an artist—Arbus's photographs are about the act of transformation, too—a man becoming a woman; a pig once alive, now dead.

She and Mitchell were wrong to call their subjects freaks, a sixteenth-century word that originally meant “sudden turn of mind.” Arbus's mind was deliberate, not sudden. She did not photograph freaks but characters, citizens in her Manhattan, a city that gets relatively little attention in her work, even though it is everywhere she turned, including inward. “I am not ghoulish am I?” she asked Marvin Israel in a 1960 note:

I absolutely hate to have a bad conscience, I think it is lewd... There was a lady stretched out on the ground... fallen, I think, yesterday weeping and saying to the cops please help me with one shoe off and covered with a blanket waiting for an ambulance which came, on Lexington ave and 57th Street. Is everyone ghoulish? It wouldn't anyway have been better to turn away, would it?

□

<sup>2</sup>In the wall text to “Arbus Friedlander Winogrand: New Documents, 1967,” the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that introduced Arbus to a larger public, John Szarkowski, then head of the museum's department of photography, wrote of the trio's pictures: “They are anti-news—or at least, non-news—things as they are rather than things as they should be, could be, or thought to be. Their photographs are not visual ‘no comment’ but rather records of real events offered to an audience who may not always believe the events are that way.” *Arbus Friedlander Winogrand: New Documents, 1967*, edited by Sarah Hermanson Meister, with an essay by Max Kozloff (Museum of Modern Art, 2017).



# Vanities & Regrets

Dan Chiasson

## Selected Later Poems

by C. K. Williams.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
249 pp., \$30.00

## Falling Ill: Last Poems

by C. K. Williams.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
54 pp., \$23.00

### 1.

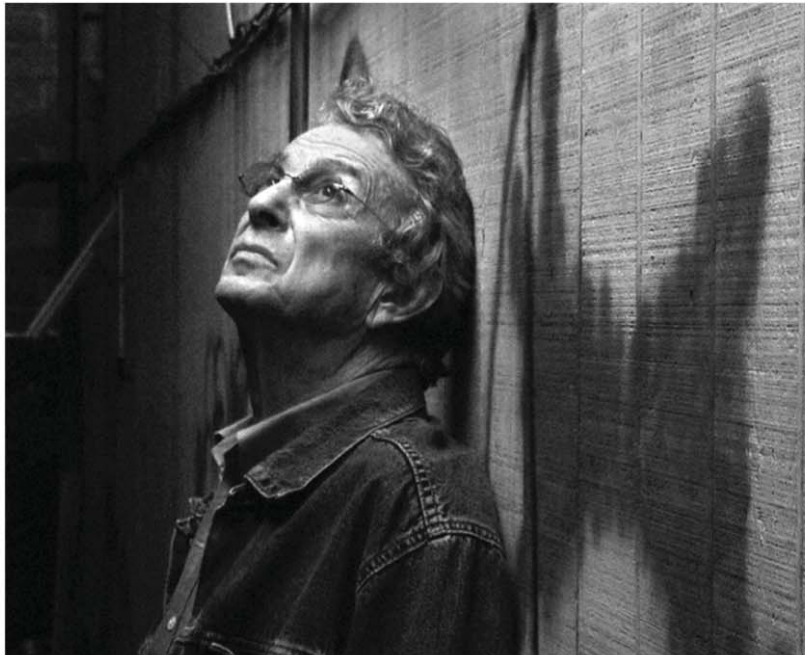
C. K. Williams died in 2015, just before the publication of his *Selected Later Poems*, and before his moving final volume, *Falling Ill: Last Poems*, saw the light of day. Williams was known as an unsparing chronicler of shames, a tender observer of human misery, a man of refinement somewhat ambivalent about the comforts and adventures available to him. His long lines and his flaneurish gambol made him a latter-day Whitman, but Williams lingered on his subjects almost uncomfortably, his gaze a form of dissection. He was very, very tall, 6'5"—a fact you can deduce from his poems, many of them based on long views, views out of windows, unobstructed views down avenues and lanes. He was also a basketball recruit at Bucknell who transferred to the University of Pennsylvania and moved to Paris.

The poems of *Falling Ill* are some of the most irritated ever written by a dying man, the humiliations of Williams's diagnosis and treatment anatomized with exasperation. Williams was always a poet of impatience and pique, welling up suddenly in poems ostensibly composed, mellow, civil, or celebratory. In the first of his "New Poems" collected with his "Selected Later" work, Williams addresses subject 1.0, the sun, in a key of dangerous, careening praise:

*O sun, bright star, our star,  
dearest, nearest, how solacing  
you remain, how consoling  
your illuminations,  
What relief on a day in our epoch  
of dire planet anguish to have  
you flinging your reliable light.*

*Oh, cosmological fast-baller,  
underwhelming only to the  
demented, like that saint who  
conceived you  
"groaning for deliverance,"  
which he promised in the end  
you'd "trade your shining  
carapace for."*

The poem, "The Sun, the Saint, the Sot," is improvised, or feels so: the word "sun" giving us (via the Latin root *sol*) both "solacing" and "consoling," the Frisbee's "flinging" become a "fast-baller"'s pitch. The utterly characteristic moment, though, is that wonderful "demented," which makes the subject of the poem not the unknowable sun but all-too-knowable, frolicsome, flip-pant humans, some "saints" and some "sots," who provide Williams, here as everywhere, with such reliable grist for his irritability machine.



C. K. Williams, Princeton, New Jersey, 2009

The italicized "our" suggests a late fixation of Williams, whose poems about twenty-first-century planet peril rank among the best of that now-crowded genre. From "Tears":

*Not sweet my own crying-not-  
crying, not hungry or angry  
these tears that keep rising then  
stopping,  
tremblingly shimmering higher  
inside me than ever but never  
spilling, never releasing—*

*this silent sob, this unuttered  
wail, this dolorous weeping for  
our our that sends its bitterest  
burning  
from my conscience to its  
fountain of tears to the arid well  
of my eyes with their taps ever  
shut.*

*Our our, meaning our land, our  
oceans, our sky, our trees,  
animals, insects—who else's  
are they?—  
And our children, their children,  
our friends' and enemies'  
children's children—our our  
and our all.*

The biblical cadences suggest a cross-temporal chorus, generation after generation praising and lamenting in hand-me-down terms, and a world that does not, itself, change; but the crises that threaten Earth also threaten such beautiful continuities. For a dying man, the certainty that he will be the only thing missing after his death is some comfort. Here the whole planet becomes a question mark.

Poets have always had an advantage over other mortals, in that their souls, verifiably present in language that predated them by years or centuries, could therefore be counted on to outlive them. If I got half of my mind and

two thirds of my emotions from George Herbert, there's something like an afterlife for George Herbert; maybe I can be, for some midcareer poet of the twenty-fifth century, proof of his own potential immortality in the hearts of poets of the twenty-ninth century. It's sort of a crazy idea, until you realize that I'm writing about, and you're reading about, George Herbert. This is the contrary of the idea that the planet won't exist, or that human interiority will be devalued, or just that the fewer and fewer people who read poetry will dwindle to none. If the collective "our" recedes, individuals will be stranded, beached, with only their memories.

The late poems here mostly jettison the stately syntax, deployed elegantly across lines longer than anyone's, that made Williams famous. Their tone is edgy, sometimes loony, caffeinated:

*Da Da Freud, Ma Ma Marx,  
growly Uncle Sartre—what  
a theory zoo to do your  
adolescence in.  
Everything'd been figured  
out, dialectic existential ego  
schemes—such fun, but then,  
oh my,  
reality arrives—the sergeant at the  
draft board roaring if we ran  
away they'd bring us back in  
chains...*

This is a midcentury American adolescence, trading the despotism of family for the thrall of Freud, Marx, and Sartre, and, finally, for the threat of the army: "oh my" is what we say about something we should have seen coming, but didn't. Even a person's era of radical freedom, seen from his seventies, seems, in retrospect, bound by the choices available to him:

*Chant to me of ba ba bliss, choir  
to me your fee-fi-fo of fucking,*

*your merry-go-round of  
disheveled beds.*

The music stops, but the "drum" of the beating heart, louder than ever now, keeps time:

*I close my eyes and there we  
are again—I can hear  
the music but who knows  
what any of it meant?  
Gone the dancing, gone  
the bliss, just those errors  
and illusions that stud our  
ancient hearts like nails.*

There's plenty here to resist—the "dancing" and "bliss" and "ancient hearts" imply that some of the illusions have stubbornly clung to this speaker—but the overall experience of reading these late poems is, as Williams intended, powerfully sad.

### 2.

Williams struck me as a courtly, old-fashioned person, whom the news of shame and the unconscious hit, when it hit him, in adolescence, hard; thereafter he was a divided soul, the chivalric side at war with desires deemed subhuman by a human stationed, after all, intentionally high. He is always the one on the stand, he and his shames; and he is always the one cross-examining, he and his conscience. The stand-off is often baldly expressed:

*If that someone who's me yet not  
me yet who judges me is always  
with me,  
as he is, shouldn't he have been  
there when I said so long ago  
that thing I said?*

*If he who rakes me with such not  
trivial shame for minor sins  
now were there then,  
shouldn't he have warned me he'd  
even now devastate me for my  
unpardonable affront?*

*I'm a child then, yet already I've  
composed this conscience-  
beast, who harries me:  
is there anything else I can say  
with certainty about who I was,  
except that I, that he,*

*could already draw from  
infinitesimal transgressions  
complex chords of remorse,  
and orchestrate ever-  
undiminishing retribution from  
the hapless rest of myself?*

Narrative anecdotes take, often in his work, a rather heavy frame. As "The Gaffe" continues, we learn that Williams, as a boy, said something unconscionable in front of another boy whose brother had died:

*We're joking around, and words  
come to my mind, which to my  
amazement are said.*

*How do you know when you can  
laugh when somebody dies,  
your brother dies?*

*is what's said, and the others go  
quiet, the backyard goes quiet,  
everyone stares,  
and I want to know now why that  
someone in me who's me yet not  
me let me say it.*

The world outside determines the rules, but not the content, for what's inside; the "Gaffe" here isn't wondering about whether one can laugh, but expressing it out loud. (Williams might have had Michael Kinsley's oft-quoted definition of "gaffe" in mind: a true statement inadvertently made.) The "conscience-beast" and the "chords of remorse" appear in practically every successful poem Williams ever wrote.

It was Yeats who nailed it, in "The Choice": the residue of living amounts to "the day's vanity, the night's remorse." A poem can unite vanity and regret, since it holds onto multiple frames of experience. But not every poet writes well in both modes at the same time, in the same poem. Williams came after a generation of American poets, Lowell and Sexton and Plath and Berryman, famous for polar swings between the two states of being; it must have been very weird to feel that these swings of emotion were somehow necessary, a requirement of the art.

In his contests between civility and shame, Williams can sometimes chase himself in circles: often the poems are composed of considerations reconsidered and second guesses second-guessed. We miss the urgency of lyric, its imperative to say what must be said before the anvil falls. But we get, in Williams's poems, a wonderfully complete arc of emotion that most poets

only violently bisect. A sly Ovidian poem, "Wood," builds several stages of awareness into its opening lines:

*That girl I didn't love, then  
because she was going to leave  
me, loved,  
that girl, that Sunday when I  
stopped by and she was in bed  
in her nightgown  
(it only came to me later that  
somebody else had just, good  
god, been with her),*

*that girl, when my hand touched  
her belly, under her plush mesh  
nightgown,  
began turning her belly to wood....*

The poem begins with the end, the last time "the girl" and Williams make love; that "wood" (and, later, "steel") represent the tendency of real things to stiffen and freeze when we remember them. This one last visit is already part of the work of art into which it will eventually be turned. The two senses of "love," and the very carefully placed comma before "then," give the "girl," though rendered passively, all the power; after all, it is she who "was going to leave me."

"Wood," like so many other poems of Williams's, is about his need to turn flesh-and-blood experience into art, the costs of that need for both experience and art; the artificial passivity of the entirely-too-active "girl" stands in for Williams's narcissism, his ability, loathsome for him to behold, to turn anything into the wood and steel of art, of a Williams poem. We go to him for this conflict, and to see how the lyric art can make sense of its own limitations.

He is less successful when he turns to public themes, mostly because his inveterate inwardness, his filigrees of concentration and attention, seem at odds with the situation. The page after "Wood" there occurs another poem about a "girl," this one called "Cassandra, Iraq." Cassandra is an Iraqi girl who, like her namesake, can "foresee and foretell" the future; this is around 2006, when the rest of us were grappling with our own inability to prophesy the depths of the Iraqi disaster.

At the beginning of the poem, Cassandra is "magnificent, as we imagine women must be/who foresee and foretell and are right and disdained." By the end, she's abducted and killed in a way even she can't predict. The poem can't decide whether to keep Cassandra a myth, and thus a legitimate symbol for our own complicity in the Iraq war, or to acknowledge that many women like her were abducted and killed. The two impulses, one driving him toward myth, the other toward documentary grit, can't be coordinated, and the poem fails.

Williams's poems relied more than they should have on demonstrations of his goodness and sympathy; we don't usually take people at their word who claim such virtues. It makes for sometimes repetitive reading, with poem after poem demonstrating the essential decency of its author, usually by outing him as indecent or contemptuous. The finest things in his work are flashes of dreams and surreal spectacles, nightmares beyond the nervous patrol of his guilty conscience, like the marvelous numbered sequence "Symbols,"

published in Williams's excellent 1997 book, *The Vigil*. Here is section 4, a terrifying poem, "Dog":

*Howl after pitiful, aching howl:  
an enormous, efficiently  
muscular doberman pinscher  
has trapped itself in an old-  
fashioned phone booth, the  
door closed firmly upon it,  
but when someone approaches  
to try to release it, the howl  
quickens and descends,*

*and if someone in pity dares  
anyway lean on and crack open  
an inch the obstinate hinge,  
the quickened howl is a snarl,  
the snarl a blade lathed in the  
scarlet gape of the gullet,  
and the creature powers itself  
towards that sinister slit, ears  
flattened, fangs flashing,*

*the way, caught in the deepest,  
most unknowing cell of itself,  
heart's secret, heart's wound,  
decorous usually, seemly, though  
starving now, desperate, will  
turn nonetheless, raging,  
ready to kill, or die, to stay where  
it is, to maintain itself just as it  
is, decorous, seemly.*

Williams usually had an easier time than this remaining decorous and seemly, whatever the announcements to the contrary. The poems in *Falling Ill* join dozens in his *Selected Later Poems* that will last, since they show us, deeper, perhaps, than he intended, the trapped dog inside the booth. □

# China's Astounding Religious Revival

Roderick MacFarquhar

**The Souls of China:  
The Return of Religion After Mao**  
by Ian Johnson.  
Pantheon, 455 pp., \$30.00

If there were just one Chinese in the world, he could be the lonely sage contemplating life and nature whom we come across on the misty mountains of Chinese scrolls. If there were two Chinese in the world, a man and a woman, lo, the family system is born. And if there were three Chinese, they would form a tight-knit, hierarchically organized bureaucracy.

But how many Chinese would there have to be to generate a religion? It could be just one—that Daoist sage in the mountains—but in reality it takes a village, according to Ian Johnson in his wonderful new book, *The Souls of China*. Chinese religion, Johnson writes, had little to do with adherence to a particular faith. Instead, it was primarily “part of belonging to your community. A village had its temples, its gods, and they were honored on certain holy days.” Or, traditionally, it could also take a workplace: “Almost every profession venerated a god.... The list is inexhaustible....” Chinese religion “was spread over every aspect of life like a fine membrane that held society together.”

At the outset of this account of China's astounding religious revival since the end of the Mao era in the 1970s, Johnson explains the differences between Chinese religious traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—and the “Abrahamic” faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: “Chinese religion had little theology, almost no clergy, and few fixed places of worship.” Confucianism was largely a moral code of what the upright person should aim to achieve by self-cultivation. In the *Analecs*, Confucius famously advised: “Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance.” For the Master, it was enough if he or one of his disciples could gain the ear of a Chinese ruler and sort out the problems of the visible world.

Daoists were freer spirits who refused to be bound by Confucian rules of propriety, and they had their own religious rituals. Only Buddhists used their faith, imported from India around the first century AD under the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), to build up a sizable monastic establishment with considerable political power, but it was reduced in size and influence in the later Tang (618–907). By then Buddhism had long been accepted as a Chinese religion.

Thereafter, for Chinese it was not really a matter of choosing: the three traditional “teachings” were a smorgasbord on offer to all and sundry in the community, and representatives of each would perform on demand, and for a price, their particular rituals on appropriate occasions such as funerals. According to Johnson, “for most of Chinese history, people believed in an amalgam of these faiths that is best described as ‘Chinese Religion.’”

Over the centuries, the Abrahamic faiths began to spread into China. Nestorian Christians arrived from Asia Minor in 635 after disputes over

doctrine with both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches. They flourished under the cosmopolitan Tang dynasty and again under Mongol rule but then effectively disappeared. Muslim traders also arrived under the Tang, but in far larger numbers under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) when Islam was spreading throughout Central Asia. Jews settled in Kaifeng when it was the capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), and flourished for a while, but gradually the community seems to have faded. Under the Ming (1368–1644), consider-

Unfortunately for the Jesuits they became embroiled in a decades-long dispute with the Dominican and Franciscan orders, which accused them of doctrinal sins for their permissiveness about Confucianism. Despite Kang Xi's support, the pope backed the Jesuits' critics in what became known as the “Rites controversy,” and in 1742, the church definitively declared Chinese rites incompatible with Christianity. In 1724, Kang Xi's successor proscribed Christianity as heterodoxy: Christianity thereby lost its best chance of emulating Buddhism and becoming

Christianity suffered what the writer David Aikman has called its “third vanishing.” Around ten thousand Protestant and Catholic missionaries were thrown out of China, some after being brainwashed. They left behind an estimated three million Catholics and one million Protestants, to be strictly guided by the Party.

Even this relatively mild dispensation did not last as Mao embraced ever more radical policies, culminating in the Cultural Revolution, during which virtually every place of worship, traditional and foreign, was shuttered and its priests humiliated and driven out. It is against this background of many decades of hostility and persecution by modernizers and Communists that Ian Johnson recounts the amazing revival that has taken place over the past forty years among all faiths in China.

Opinion surveys are notoriously unreliable, but when the question concerns ties to a religious faith in a country ruled by an atheistic Communist Party, then extreme caution and perhaps prevarication on the part of those interviewed would be understandable. In view of this the numbers emerging from successive surveys are remarkable: some 200 million Buddhists and Daoists, 50–60 million Protestants, 10 million Catholics, and 20–25 million Muslims. In addition, there may be 175 million who practice some form of folk religion or belong to small sects. Official surveys have revealed that there are half a million Buddhist monks and nuns in 33,000 temples, and 48,000 Daoist priests and nuns affiliated with 9,000 Daoist temples. The great majority of Protestants are members of underground or “house churches.” Assuming these are at least approximately accurate figures, around a third of the country's 1.3 billion people admit to a need for a faith to sustain them.

Of course, all religious organizations operate under the watchful eyes of local police, and not all adherents are treated with benign neglect. Tibetan Buddhists are tightly controlled, because most are still loyal to the exiled Dalai Lama, and some have committed suicide. In Xinjiang, there is regular unrest partly because Muslim Uighurs have had restrictions placed outside the practice of their faith. Both Tibetans and Uighurs are suspected to be national “splittists” by the Han Chinese authorities in Beijing.

The faith that has been the most brutally treated is Falun Gong, a sect that started as part of the popular revival in the 1980s of traditional qigong practices involving exercises and meditation. At one point, it was said to have had 100 million followers. But in April 1999, some ten thousand petitioners turned up unannounced outside the Zhongnanhai leadership complex in Beijing to ask the central government to halt a newspaper campaign against Falun Gong. The degree to which the sect was secretly organized was clearly alarming to the authorities, and General Secretary Jiang Zemin ordered a full-scale crackdown, which resulted in the deaths of many adherents, often from abuse in custody. In this case, it was the deep roots of Falun Gong in



Worshippers at the Tibetan Buddhist Lama Temple in central Beijing, March 2014

able pressure was put on the adherents of non-Chinese religions to assimilate.

Of all those professing foreign faiths, it was the Jesuits who had the greatest impact in premodern China. Arriving in the late sixteenth century, Matteo Ricci emerged as their most prominent leader. He and his colleagues impressed the Confucian elite with their knowledge of science in general and astronomy in particular, for the emperor had to demonstrate to his people a satisfactory relationship with heaven.

The Jesuits flourished particularly after the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) supplanted the Ming. The emperor Kang Xi (r. 1661–1722) put the Jesuits in charge of the royal observatory, and even more significantly issued an edict permitting the practice of Christianity throughout the empire:

The Europeans are very quiet; they do not excite any disturbances in the provinces, they do no harm to anyone, they commit no crimes, and their doctrine has nothing in common with that of the false sects in the empire, nor has it any tendency to excite sedition.... We decide therefore that all temples dedicated to the Lord of heaven, in whatever place they may be found, ought to be preserved, and that it may be permitted to all who wish to worship this God to enter these temples, offer him incense, and perform the ceremonies practised according to ancient custom by the Christians. Therefore let no one henceforth offer them any opposition.

accepted as a Chinese religion.

Christian missionaries returned, however, if not under auspicious circumstances. John Fairbank, the great expert on nineteenth-century Western trade along the China coast, used to regale his Harvard students with tales of merchants selling opium from one side of their boat while missionaries were handing out Bibles on the other side. Missionaries were not welcomed at court any longer; their most prominent nineteenth-century “convert” was Hong Xiuquan, who proclaimed himself the younger brother of Jesus and led the midcentury Taiping rebellion, which lasted fourteen years, cost an estimated 20 million lives, and almost brought down the Qing empire.

Missionaries persisted, and though the rate of conversion was disappointing, their influence grew through the establishment of schools, colleges, and hospitals. Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary who led the struggle that brought down the Qing dynasty in 1912, was converted, as was his successor Chiang Kai-shek. But they were infused with a modernizing zeal that held that traditional Chinese faiths, particularly folk religions, were superstitions and had to be suppressed; hundreds of thousands of folk temples were destroyed. Only the most important Buddhist and Daoist temples survived.

When the Communists took over China in 1949, they organized the five religions they acknowledged—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—into associations, part of their United Front with non-Communists. Temples and churches remained open. But foreigners could not be members of the United Front, and



traditional Chinese practices and its widespread following, including within the Party, rather than any foreign connections that frightened the Communist leaders.

Johnson takes us through the Chinese lunar year, which is associated with many traditional religious and community activities, as the backdrop to telling us of contemporary faith as practiced mainly by three groups of people: a family that makes an annual pilgrimage to a particular temple in Beijing; a Daoist family in Shanxi; and a group of Protestant Christians in Chengdu.

On the first day of the lunar year, you stay at home with your family. On the second day, you pay visits. In Beijing Johnson paid his respects to the “elders and betters” of the Ni family, the eighty-one-year-old patriarch, Ni Zhenshan, and his fifty-six-year-old son, Ni Jincheng. “Betters” because “they understood infinitely more”:

They knew all the holidays on the traditional calendar, the right way to kowtow before a statue, how to recite sutras, which cigarettes to smoke and which grain alcohol to drink. They knew which fruits to eat in April and why you never make a gift of a knife or a plum.

In the 1990s, after old Mr. Ni had recovered from kidney cancer, he fulfilled a vow to make a pilgrimage to the temple of Our Lady of the Azure Clouds, one of the most popular goddesses in northern China, on a mountain forty miles from the center of Beijing. On the way back he told his son he would like to set up his own pilgrimage association. Such organizations involve much hard work, expense, and time. Mr. Ni wanted his to serve pilgrims free tea and steamed buns, and thus the Whole Heart Philanthropic Salvation Tea Association was established. It required a shrine and an altar, expensive crockery, and a lot of green tea. The family steele by the temple would ensure that the memory of the Nis’ charity would live on.

Johnson becomes so entwined with the Ni family that, three months later, on the thirtieth day of the third lunar month, the eve of the annual pilgrimage to the temple of Our Lady of the Azure Clouds, he drives supplies up the mountain for the Ni’s Tea Association. During the festival, Wang Defeng, the Communist official who oversaw the rebuilding of the temple in the 1980s and now runs the festival, explains to Johnson that, though a materialist himself, he does his job “for Our Lady. That’s my service, to make sure she is respected properly.” He was not a believer, but like Confucians down the ages, his duty was his faith. Johnson’s account of the festival and his encounters there is a masterpiece of observation and empathy; he seems to disarm most Chinese he meets into thinking he is one of them (though there are hints that some of them might not be averse to publicity).

After two weeks, the Chinese New Year festivities end with a “Lantern Festival.” Johnson spends it with another clan, the Li family, who have been *yinyang* men—providers of religious services—for nine generations. Johnson describes *yinyang* men as “a cross

between a geomancer, a fortune-teller, and a funeral director.” They carry out “a form of family-based Daoism that was how the religion was originally practiced...*yinyang* priests are masters of the *yin* world—the dark world of death—but also the *yang* world of brightness and life.” He describes in detail one of their funeral services, run by a father and son. But the son, Li Bin, is more than just a funeral director. Johnson had first met him at Carnegie Hall, where he was a member of a group performing traditional music.

Johnson had been inclined to dismiss the whole enterprise as chinoiserie, but back in China found out that, through a set of chance encounters, the Li family had become one of 1,200 groups assigned the task of preserving China’s “intangible cultural heritage” (a UNESCO term) by passing on their



Wang Yi, the founder and pastor of the Protestant Early Rain Reformed Church, Chengdu, circa 2014

musical knowledge and skills to future generations. In that capacity, they had traveled to Holland and Italy as well as New York. But the Li family were really Daoist priests and they earned their living by performing their priestly functions with the precision of nine generations resting on their shoulders.

Why does China’s current leader, Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, tolerate worshipers of Our Lady of the Azure Clouds, Daoist *yinyang* men, and folk religion generally? This is the kind of “superstition” that Mao and his colleagues attempted to stamp out in the early post-revolution years. In many of his actions and pronouncements, Xi seems to want to return to the 1950s, which many of Mao’s colleagues who survived the Cultural Revolution regarded as a golden age: the Party’s morale was high, its purposes clear, and corruption had not eaten into its soul. Johnson writes:

Old Mr. Ni made a point of telling me that the great pilgrimage associations are independent of the government. This is true, as are the spiritual lives of most of the people we followed over the past year. And yet the state played an overwhelming role in their lives seeking to contain and co-opt them.

Xi’s concept of making China great again provides space for traditional religions because historically they were deeply woven into popular culture. Early in his political career, Xi served

as Party secretary in Zhengding in Hebei province, a place described in official reports as “chaotic, dirty, and backward.” There he had presided over the reconstruction of a famous Zen Buddhist temple and installed as abbot a famous monk, Shi Youming, who had just spent thirty years as a farm laborer, courtesy of the state. Xi ensured that the temple was recognized as a legal place of worship. Other temples there were also rebuilt. According to Shi’s successor as abbot:

Xi did a great service for Buddhism.... Even when he was working in the south, when he went to Beijing, he would stop by and visit.... He showed respect. I’m not sure he was a believer, but he respected it. He knew more about it than most people.

Johnson met an old woman, one of Shi’s earliest disciples, who insisted that Xi believed in Buddhism. When reminded that he was a Communist leader, she responded:

Well, of course he would not have lit incense.... But when you look at what happened during his term, how this temple was rebuilt and how he kept coming back to see the old master, how else can I express it? Actions speak louder than words.

Whatever his knowledge and commitment, Xi would probably agree with Johnson’s contention that the government can control such religious centers, for they have no foreign ties, and that it will encourage “acceptable forms of faith as a way to strengthen its position as the arbiter of the nation’s moral and spiritual values.”

This may explain why there seems to be greater tolerance for Protestantism than Catholicism, with its central hierarchy in Rome. The Vatican clearly wants to reenter China, perhaps seeing it as the one country left—as Protestants have demonstrated—where large-scale conversions can be envisaged, but its closed-door negotiations with Beijing seem to have ended after the Vatican insisted that only it could appoint bishops, which have been appointed by the Chinese government since 1957. By contrast, Protestantism, with no foreign leader seeking such extraterritorial rights, is growing exponentially in China. Some Chinese will tell you that this is be-

cause it is the religion of the majority in the world’s most powerful nation.

For Johnson, who was brought up as a Protestant, the Early Rain Reformed Church on the nineteenth floor of a “seedy office tower” in Chengdu, the capital of the vast western province of Sichuan, was familiar but different in both Chinese and Western terms. It was unregistered, what is often called an “underground” or “house” church, but it was big and public. Members had to agree to give their names and addresses and be willing to share them with the authorities. Every week a policeman would call to get the list of those attending the services. The congregants were devout, but having been cut off from the outside world since the expulsion of the missionaries, they were largely ignorant about most of the church calendar. Nor did they cling to Chinese traditional festivals, rejecting them as pagan.

Wang Yi had founded the Early Rain Reformed Church in 2005, and is now one of China’s best-known preachers. Videos of his sermons (normally forty-five minutes) circulate on social media. Johnson heard him giving one about Auntie Wei:

Auntie Wei was someone I think it would be fair to call a simple woman. She was a mother and had a hard life. She raised two daughters mostly on her own. Her husband had died young....

She was not someone who heard the word *wansui* [long live] too often. If she heard it, she would have thought it applied to China, or the Communist Party, or Chairman Mao. *Wansui*: that’s almost always reserved for them. This is wrong. *Wansui*, this word, if it belongs to anyone, it belongs to Auntie Wei....

I tell you that she can hear *wansui* now because she is *wansui*; she is immortal because of Jesus. It’s not the government that can confer this word. It’s God, and it’s by how we live our daily lives. It’s the choices we make despite the immoral society we live in. This is what real *wansui* is. It’s nothing that the Communist Party can provide. It’s something that we can make ourselves....

Auntie Wei was one of our sisters. We loved her. But it’s she who possesses eternal life, not the government. She created it for herself by living a good life, by being our sister in the church, and resisting the immorality around her.

After listening to the sermon, Johnson understood why Wang Yi had forsaken a career as a human rights lawyer and well-regarded public intellectual. Then, most of what he said was censored. He risked house arrest and a blocked Internet connection; he could issue an appeal to free a political prisoner, but who would hear it? Here with an audience of a hundred people, he could help a grieving family and teach the congregation how to lead a different life, telling them that it was ordinary people who possessed real power in the authoritarian state. As a pastor he could directly influence hundreds, and indirectly thousands through his videos.

Wang’s boldness in openly exalting the individual as more worthy than the party worries Johnson. Wang has

Calum MacLeod/USA Today

recently opened a seminary in which Friday classes are devoted to the difficult study of Greek so that Christians can read the gospels in the original language. This directly defies the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which is in charge not only of all churches, temples, and mosques but also of seminaries. Another class was on “church planting”—the process of setting up satellite churches when the mother church becomes too crowded.

Early on in *The Souls of China*, Johnson quotes from two Western historians who have described China as “a Middle Kingdom that has lost its Middle.” It is an epigram that reflects what many Western observers of China have dis-

cerned since the end of the Maoist era. Behind the amazing economic surge that has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, there is no civic morality or national dream that unites Party and people. This is why Xi Jinping seeks to revive a popular pride in China’s culture and history, while simultaneously trying to root out corruption—in order to restore the Party’s morale and dynamism.

But what Johnson brilliantly describes in this book is how ordinary people, seeking faith to give meaning to their lives, are not waiting for Xi to lead them to his version of the promised land. Daoists, Buddhists, and Confucians are allowed to rebuild temples and memories of past practices persist, enabling believers to return to them.

Protestants, however, are evolving in

unexpected ways. Johnson describes the two early indigenous models of China’s reform era. In the bustling east coast city of Wenzhou, where dynamic family businesses are the norm, workers usually belonged to the church favored by their boss. In Henan province, charismatic leaders ran rural churches and clashed with the authorities. These models were weakened as family firms morphed into larger enterprises and as rural Henan became more urban.

The new big city churches are different. Chinese are no longer isolated from the outside world and Protestants “seek global norms, not local forms of their faith.” As Johnson wisely remarks, perhaps this lesson applies not only to Christians but to China as a whole; international norms and standards are

seeping into the country. There are certainly striking examples of this: the *People’s Daily* journalists who got on their bicycles during the Tiananmen events and rode through the square demanding to be allowed to report and print the truth; the lawyers, now vanished into prison or under house arrest, who have risked so much in trying to defend prisoners on the basis of the rights enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

Johnson suggests that the congregation of Early Rain would love to participate in global discussions of moral issues, and that it also yearns for a country truly committed to the rule of law and human rights. But “like Wang Yi’s congregation, we should take what has been accomplished—incomplete and inadequate as it is—as a miracle.” □

## The Lion in Winter

Michael Hofmann

### Of All That Ends

by Günter Grass,  
translated from the German  
by Breon Mitchell.  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,  
167 pp., \$28.00

Not long ago, I translated “Aging as a Problem for Artists” by the German expressionist poet and essayist Gottfried Benn, written a couple of years before he died, in 1956, at age seventy. There is not much literature on the subject, Benn says, apologizing for his magpie methods, before, with impressive assiduity and imagination, he stuffs paragraphs with examples of artistic longevity and finds individual instances in which age and artistry stand in interesting relation to one another. He talks about the idea of late style, or late work: in Immanuel Kant, in Lorenzo Lotto, in Edward Burne-Jones, in Hokusai, in Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Beethoven and Leonardo. “In Hokusai (1760–1849),” he writes,

I found the following: “From the age of six, I was mad keen on drawing. By the time I was fifty, I had published a great many drawings, but everything I did before my seventy-third year is worthless. Approaching the age of seventy-three, I began to understand something of the true nature of animals, plants, fishes, and insects. By the time I am eighty, I shall have progressed further, with ninety I shall be able to see through to the secret nature of things, and when I am a hundred and ten, everything of mine, be it no more than a line or a dot, will be full of life.”

In the end, though, perhaps Benn’s best example is himself:

Probably I’m too old to get to the bottom of all this, tiredness and melancholy fog my brain. I have heard Pablo de Sarasate on the violin and Caruso in the Met. The Astors were sitting in the diamond horseshoe. I have seen Bergmann operate, and paraded in front of the last Kaiser. I learned to read by the light of an oil lamp, and stud-



Günter Grass, Berlin, 1993

Jens Rüttsch/Focus/Contact Press Images

ied Haeckel’s forbidden *Riddles of the World*. I have driven and flown, but I have also seen clipper ships and skies without vapor trails—past—gone.

Bergmann was the surgeon Ernst von Bergmann, a pioneer of asepsis and an early wearer of white; the Kaiser was Wilhelm II; Benn served as a doctor in the German army in both world wars.

Benn’s secret, and perhaps the secret of one kind of old-age writing, lies in the nouns, including the names. Nouns—if you are able to select the right nouns—age well. Good nouns are good bones. What is a life, when it comes down to it? What will it have been? Sentence by sentence, as his text emerges here, it is music—or more broadly, artistic experience. It is social distinction and setting. It is work. It is education and enlightenment. It is technology and travel. These few sentences of Benn’s prose, chosen almost at random, are ex-

quisitely balanced. Horseshoe and diamond (the wealth-encrusted diadem, I guess, of the first row of boxes). The names, Kaiser and Caruso, Astor and Sarasate. The paired experiences and stimuli. The looking and reading. The driving and flying. The clipper ships, once the fastest mode of intercontinental transport, crammed with sail, and devised originally for the transporting of tea; and the skies, then without any manmade steam in them. A line or dot, but, as Hokusai says, full of life.

There is no one better than Benn at this kind of ecstatic summary, which has something both giddy and unerring about it, but I’d like at least to take one other successful instance of Vetscribe, to give it an Orwellesque name. This comes from an author Benn admired, another controversial hard case like himself, the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun (1859–1952). Both had been compromised by their politics. Benn had briefly sympathized with the Nazis

when they came to power, hoping they would overcome Germany’s economic and political instability and share his cultural pessimism and expressionist aesthetics. He became head of the Prussian Academy’s poetry section and signed a declaration of loyalty to Hitler. By mid-1934 he had come to detest the Nazis and returned to the army, calling it “the aristocratic form of emigration”; the regime declared his work “degenerate” and banned him from writing in 1938. Immediately after the war the Allies banned him from publishing because of his early support of the Nazis, but by the time of his death he was once again recognized as a major poet.

Hamsun, who had won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1920, was also in the doghouse when the war ended. He had met Hitler, and had many admirers among the other Nazi high-ups. During the German occupation of Norway, he had sided publicly and openly with the occupiers. Now, like the Fascist broadcaster Ezra Pound, he faced the dual—though at least mutually exclusive—diagnoses of treason and insanity. The Norwegian state would have him declared mad or bad.

In his last book, *On Overgrown Paths* (1949), Hamsun describes the three years of his ordeal. He writes out of various sorts of captivity and obloquy, from house arrest and a hospital and an old people’s home, but what he writes is anything but an apology: “I see a flag at half mast. Someone has died, but it’s not me. It isn’t anyone else among us either, we are so durable. Our daily lives rattle along, without any escapades.” Benn wrote in a review of the book:

He reminds me of a big old lion, blinking contemptuously from his cage at the zoo visitors, and, when he thinks he sees a lawyer or doctor among them, spitting in their direction through the bars.

Under attack from two authorities, psychiatry and the law, Hamsun mounts a sort of double defense: a parade of defiance, yes, but also a show of harmlessness (as Benn of course sees,

with his image of the king of the beasts in his cage). “You can see I know what I’m about. How can I possibly be mad?” it seems to say, but also “how can I possibly hurt you?” He writes, near the beginning:

At the same time I didn’t want to completely give up my walks over the hill either. I had dreamed them up myself, there were trees and rocks that I recognized, and I knew there was a friendly rustle around me, even though I was deaf and could no longer hear it.

It is a discovery of age that something can be there—as here the rustle—even when not or no longer perceived.

This is Vetscribe as performance, as hum, as noise. The thing here is not nouns, but the habits of mind, the seeming perplexity, the burbling voice. Things appear, disappear, reappear again. It is the book of someone rather deaf, talking to himself. Hamsun is mostly solitary and within his body. Plot or intrigue don’t much interest him. He writes about going for walks, about tending a little spruce tree he has adopted. He goes to an oculist, indulges in reveries about old times in America, fifty, sixty years earlier, passes acerbic judgments on life in the home where, a little to his mystification, he finds himself. For company he has strangers—peculiar people, impostors even, people posing as strangers, could there be such a thing—or pretty nurses, who are gradually taken away from him. Sometimes old readers visit him and shake his hand, or give him presents:

A nice lady in Java has sent me a box of cigars via Holland, she and her husband have read some of my books, she says, kind regards and thanks. How wonderful of her to do that, I think to myself, being a foreigner and so far away, bless her! People favor the old. But some day I will be out of cigars, what then? Then I’ll quit smoking, just quit. I’ve done it three times before, for one year each time, to the day. I’m going to have that much control over myself as to quit. Good. But of course I’ll start again, so what is it all for? I’m also going to have that much control of myself as to start again.

Hamsun concludes that there is no purpose and no reason to human behavior. (The implication is that the difficulties he is in and the accusations he is facing are not quite real either.) Meanwhile, the shapes he makes in his mind are self-involved curls; they go away from him, and then return to him, in short order; the gift of cigars makes him think, almost immediately, of the time when they will be finished, and then of his determination still to go back to smoking again afterward. Time is a beach, a comic or absurd arena, where things are washed up, washed away, washed back. What are manmade categories like insanity or treason? Time overwhelms all possibility of a single or definitive outcome. The climax, not of the book, but of the events of the book, is handled like this:

After my talk the prosecutor spoke, after him again the defense attorney. Once more I sat for hours on end not knowing what was

going on. Eventually I was handed a couple of written questions by the court, and I answered them.

The day went by. Evening darkness came on.

It was over.

In its way, this is extraordinary, even rather magnificent, in its show of indifference. Is he to be acquitted or hanged by the neck until dead? He doesn’t even care to tell us. (He was fined.) He is all alone in time. His book goes on for another thirty or forty pages of crusty grandeur.

It would be wrong to suggest that Günter Grass (1927–2015), the chief luminary of postwar German fiction and leftist political engagement, was

Knut Hamsun



ever in as much trouble as Hamsun, or, before him, Benn, but following the award of the Nobel Prize in 1999 his reputation did take a few buffets, and it is not unexpected to find him reduced and melancholy and truculent in old age. In the autobiography of his early years, translated in 2007 as *Peeling the Onion*, he revealed that although throughout his career he had aggressively insisted on full disclosure and repentance in others, he had himself as a seventeen-year-old briefly belonged to the Waffen-SS. (It was not so much the revelation itself as the delay and the atrocious style of revealing it that should have been the story.)

In 2012 he published a poem entitled “What Must Be Said” on the subject of the Israeli bomb, which caused further controversy (“Why only now, grown old, and with what ink remains, do I say: Israel’s atomic power endangers/ an already fragile world peace?”). He brought out *Grimms Wörter: Eine Liebeserklärung*, a wildly punning “declaration of love” to the German language of Grimm’s dictionary that will presumably remain untranslated. His last novel was *Crabwalk* (2003). And his for now last work, a collection of reflections, poems, and drawings, was published a few months after his death in April 2015, and is now out in English, in the translation of Breon Mitchell: *Of All That Ends*.

The work is very much of a piece: ninety-six reflections, recollections, miniatures. Grass’s soft, rather sour, smeary, seaweedy drawings illustrate the prose, which is recapitulated or simplified in the poems. Probably the single most impressive aspect of the work is the persistence of Grass’s ability to shape (his *Formwille*, I am thinking) over the length of a whole short book. It

is like a sequence of minor chords: the images of dead birds, withered leaves, misshapen nails and molted feathers, dried mushrooms and wizened frogs, severed fingers and ends of rope, the author’s stubby extinguished (and forbidden) pipes and his toothless mouth; the little essays or poems on politics, memories, old books, unwelcome cultural developments, dreams and fears, the countryside and the author’s increasing physical decrepitude.

Not so much a *memento mori* as a litany of decay and a Novemberish nature, the book is Baroque, like most of Grass, in its redundancy and piling on and curdled rhetorical power. Truly his home is the morbid, unlovely, war-torn seventeenth century of Gryphius and Grimmelshausen, of Zurbarán and El Greco, Hals and Rubens, all pessimism and carnality and mercenaries. His element is the pungent twilight cloud, his mascot the dimpled Cupid, his weapon of choice the satirical musket or prophetic arquebus that goes off in many directions, and has every chance of detonating the man wielding it.

What to my mind distinguishes good Vetscribe, for all its many variants, is that it remains dry to the touch. It doesn’t matter whether something is trim and its own index, like Benn, or all-over-the-shop even as it goes about setting one foot in front of the other, like Hamsun; it should aspire to the condition of Hokusai’s line or dot, an ideogram of life. It should be austere, astringent, superior. Perhaps a little effortless. A moist confusion of feelings, a fussy deployment of too many means, or a surplus of intentions, all are equally undesirable and, in Grass, equally present. It is enough to give a bad name to the writing of old age. The graphic work (which reminds me of the disappointing late “American” period of the Weimar caricaturist George Grosz) and the writing alike are squishy and corrupt; they resemble not clean, simple, calcified fossil or bone as much as something Grass recalls when contemplating final arrangements for himself and his wife:

The bodies buried in the bog in Schleswig-Holstein, now placed on show under glass in the Schloss Gottorf Museum. Those bones turned soft; you could still see tissue, skin and knotted hair, as well as bits of clothing, relics of a ghastly prehistoric age.

But this is almost exactly what you get in *Of All That Ends*: soft tissue and cartilage; half-commerged, half-corroded, semi-identifiable, and abundantly lived in detritus.

Grass was rarely if ever a graceful writer, but this shows his progress from the “windfowl” (of his early book of poems, *Die Vorzüge der Windhühner*) to the windbag. The bloom of his vices is in full decay: error-strewn and pedantic, militant and mannered, whimsical and ponderous. Here are undesirable ornament, allusion, personification, cliché, weary polemic, and irony, all in invariably overstuffed and blathering formulations:

As the general decline of values was being universally decreed around the clock by the man in the street, in lengthy essays, and



on flat-screens and the Internet, arousing general assent and cynical commentary, money too went into a consumptive decline, though new currency was constantly being printed and circulated as a spur to speculative profit through virtual transactions on the global market. (“On Payments”)

I can’t remember when I last read sentences so ungainly that they had me doing that slicing “Cut!” gesture at every break. Each phrase or clause here seems terminal—and still they keep coming. “Universally decried”—“around the clock”—“by the man in the street”—“in lengthy essays”—“and on flat-screens”—“and the Internet.” “Enough already!” you say—and there are eight segments still to come. Truly, it’s a form of torture. Here is someone by now so crabwise, so musclebound in his epic posture, that the only way he knows of getting into a sentence is sidling or reversing into it:

When, like other young men and women in the Düsseldorf Art Academy, a cigarette clung to my lower lip as a badge of existentialism, bobbing up and down at every word, it was Albert Camus who rolled the boulder of Sisyphus our way—in German translation—just after the war.

Poor Camus. Or poor Rabelais: “Re-reading books that were my lifelong companions: time, that voracious shredder, has not subdued the flood of words, the biting scorn of François Rabelais” (“With Staying Power”). How

many partial metaphors are going off at half-cock in that little monster? Five? Six?

Grass’s poems, being simpler and a little plainer, are usually preferable to the prose. Here is the first and better half of one called “To Pass the Time” (the second half, for some reason, is all about sand castles):

*Reread the books you finished  
long ago,  
deliver indignant diatribes,  
redate history, this time in reverse,  
restore words you once crossed  
out,  
plant young trees where the storm  
felled the old,  
see butterflies with closed eyes,  
patiently count dead flies  
fallen from the windowpanes,  
chew memory like gum  
that still has a little flavor left,  
pass time with guessing games  
and twiddling thumbs,  
visit that spot in the cemetery  
and now and then lie to the clock.*

But it’s not a patch on the poem called “Pleasures” on which it’s very evidently based, from Bertolt Brecht’s late “Buckow” period (this is Michael Hamburger’s sheepish translation):

*The first look out of the window  
in the morning  
The old book found again  
Enthusiastic faces  
Snow, the change of the seasons  
The newspaper  
The dog  
Dialectics  
Taking showers, swimming*

*Old music  
Comfortable shoes  
Taking things in  
New music  
Writing, planting  
Traveling  
Singing  
Being friendly.*

This has an honesty, a quiddity, an economy, a capacity for surprise (“New music,” “Being friendly”), and an absence of straining that Grass has never been able to offer. With the objectivity of a real “Classic,” Brecht supplies neither commentary nor anxiety; his poem is all about him, but his own presence in it is unnecessary; Grass is wearisomely and very characteristically half-there in his. As often, he is saying “look at me”; not so Brecht.

It may be supposed that something here has been lost in translation, and so it has. For instance, the “indignant diatribes” above are “*ungehaltne Reden*” in the original: furious speeches that may or may not have been given. *Ungehalten*, literally “unheld,” is perfectly equivocal on this point. It can mean intemperate, and it can also mean unspoken. But this sort of Grassian ornament, really a sort of tic or foolish pirouette, is perhaps better out than in anyway.

Michael Henry Heim, Grass’s previous translator, came up with a sort of slimline Grass (in *Peeling the Onion*, in *My Century*). Breon Mitchell is generally more indulgent, and hence reads less well. What really baffles me, though, are his mistakes, especially in the longer prose pieces, where he

sometimes quite loses the thread. He misreads *Bildersturz* as *Bildersturm* (it’s a flood of TV images that’s both-ering Grass, not Cromwellian iconoclasm); renders *gesotten* (sautéed—it’s the same word) as “boiled” (an especially horrid mistake to make with the epicure Grass—“boiled mushrooms”). Grass hopes to be reborn as a cuckoo; and then: “Promises were called out year by year.” What’s this? Some uncharacteristic optimism? No, the sentence is in the conditional, and he’s looking forward to his annual annunciations of spring: it’s what cuckoos do. “*Jahr für Jahr liessen sich laut rufend Versprechungen machen.*” I might say: “Think of the noisy annunciations I could make each spring.”

In a dream of jealousy called “Yours and Mine,” involving Grass’s (organist) wife and a baritone, one reads: “My dreaming ear took in the nuances of the performance that had just faded away.” Not so: he overhears *them talking* about nuances of the performance. “*Es ging . . . um Nuancen.*” Not a rare or difficult construction. There are more as well. In a sense, it doesn’t matter much, and one can understand how it might happen with this author, simply because of the indifferent fussiness and general pincushion quality of Grass’s sentences.

Perhaps the thing that’s worth doing is worth doing badly. Or the thing not worth doing, for that matter. What’s odd, though, is that Mitchell is not just the translator of Grass’s best-known novel, *The Tin Drum*, but its retranslator, after Ralph Manheim’s original version. In other words, he is supposed to offer superior accuracy. Puzzle me that one out. □

# What Gets Called 'Civil War'?

Linda Colley



Benjamin West: Death on the Pale Horse, 1817

**Civil Wars:**  
**A History in Ideas**  
by David Armitage.  
Knopf, 349 pp., \$27.95

The end of the world is on view at Philadelphia. Hurling across a twenty-five-foot-wide canvas in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Together, Death, Pestilence, Famine, and War ravage the earth amid blood-red banners and what looks like cannon smoke. Warriors fall before their swords and spears, and women, children, and babies are slaughtered.

Benjamin West completed this version of *Death on the Pale Horse* in 1817, two years after the Battle of Waterloo. It is tempting therefore to see in the painting not only the influence of the book of Revelation, and perhaps the elderly West's intimations of his own imminent mortality, but also a retrospective verdict on the terrible catalog of death and destruction that had been the Napoleonic Wars. Yet West's original inspiration seems to have been another conflict. He first sketched out his ideas for *Death on the Pale Horse* in 1783, the concluding year of the American War of Independence. Bitterly divisive on both sides of the Atlantic, the war imposed strains on West himself. Pennsylvanian born and bred, he was a supporter of American resistance.

But in 1763 he migrated to Britain, and he spent the war working as a historical painter at the court of George III. So every day he served the monarch against whom some of his countrymen were fighting, knowing all the while that this same king was launching his own legions against Americans who had once been accounted British subjects. It was this tension that helped to inform West's apocalyptic vision. More viscerally than most, he understood that the American Revolu-

tion was also in multiple respects civil warfare.

Tracing some of the histories of the idea of civil war, and showing how definitions and understandings of this mode of conflict have always been volatile and contested, is the purpose of this latest book by David Armitage. Like all his work, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* is concise, wonderfully lucid, highly intelligent, and based on a confident command of a wide range of printed sources. It is also ambitious, and divided into three parts in the manner of Julius Caesar's Gaul. This seems appropriate since Armitage roots his account in ancient Rome. It was here, he claims, between the first century BCE and the fifth century CE, that lethal conflicts within a recognized society, a common enough experience in earlier eras and in other regions, began to be viewed and categorized as a distinctive form of war: *bellum civile*.

How this came to pass is the subject of Part One of the book. In Part Two, Armitage switches to the early modern era, which is here defined mainly as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and shows how elite male familiarity with classical texts encouraged Europeans and some of their overseas colonizers to interpret the civil commotions of their own times very much in Roman terms. Part Three takes the story from the nineteenth century to the dangerous and precarious present. Whereas the incidence of overt conflicts between major states has receded during the post-1945 "long peace," civil wars have proliferated, especially in parts of Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The "shadow of civil war," Armitage contends, has now become "the most widespread, the most destructive, and the most characteristic form of organized human violence."

But why ancient Rome to begin with? Armitage attributes its centrality to evolving Western conceptions of civil warfare partly to this culture's marked success in establishing and stabilizing the idea of a distinct citizenry and political community. "Civil War could, by definition, exist only after a commonwealth (*civitas*) had been created." More significant, as far as perceptions in later centuries were concerned, were the writings and careers of two brilliant Romans, each of whom in different ways was caught up in the rivalry between Julius Caesar and Pompey and destroyed by the violence of their warring successors.

Cicero, an opponent of Caesar, is the earliest-known writer to have used the term "civil war." He also employed it in a speech that he delivered at the Forum in 66 BCE, close to the spot where his severed head and hands would be put on display twenty-three years later, as punishment for his activism and his words. In the following century, the youthful poet Lucan completed a ten-book masterwork, *De Bello Civile*, on how, under Caesar, "Rome's high race plunged in her [own] vitals her victorious sword." Lucan dedicated his saga to Nero, the emperor who later forced him to commit suicide.

Their writings and the gory fate of these men helped to foster and perpetuate the idea that civil warfare was a particularly nasty variant of organized human violence. It is in part this reputation, Armitage contends, that has made the subject of civil war a more impoverished field of inquiry than interstate conflict. Given that the English, American, and Spanish civil wars have all long been historiographical cottage industries, I am not sure this is wholly correct. But it is the case, and he documents this powerfully throughout, that the ideas and negative language that have accumulated around the notion of

"civil war" have resulted in the term's use often being politically driven in some way. As with treason, what gets called civil war, and becomes remembered as such, frequently depends on which side eventually prospers.

At times, the term has been deliberately withheld for fear of seeming to concede to a set of antagonists even a glimmer of a claim to sovereignty in a disputed political space. Thus the royalist Earl of Clarendon chose in his history to describe the English Parliament's campaigns against Charles I after 1642 not as a civil war, but as a rebellion. In much the same way, an early US official history of the Union and Confederate navies described their encounters between 1861 and 1865 as a "War of the Rebellion," thereby representing the actions of the Southern states as a mere uprising against an indisputably legitimate government.

For Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg in 1863, by contrast, it was essential to insist that America was undergoing a civil war. He wanted to trumpet in public more than simply the rightness of a particular governing regime. Since its survival was still in doubt, he needed as well to rally support for the Union itself, that "new nation, conceived in liberty" as he styled it: "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure."

Of course, had the American Civil War ended differently, it might well not have been called a civil war at all. Later generations might have remembered it as a "War of Southern Independence," or even as a "Southern Revolution." As Armitage points out, when major insurrections break out within a polity, they almost invariably start out as civil wars in the sense that the local population is initially divided in its loyalties and responses. But if the insurrectionists eventually triumph, then—as in Rus-



sia after 1917, or China after 1949—it has increasingly been the case that the struggle is redescribed by the victors as a revolution. Partly because of the continuing influence of the ancient Roman cultural inheritance, “revolution” possesses far more positive connotations than the more grubby and ambivalent “civil war.”

As a searching, nuanced, and succinct analysis of these recurring ideas, linguistic fluctuations, and shifting responses over a dramatic span of time, and across national and continental boundaries, Armitage’s account is a valuable and suggestive one. But as he admits, it is hardly comprehensive. This is not simply because of the scale of his subject matter, but also because of his chosen methodologies.

In dealing with civil wars he practices what, in an earlier work, he styled “serial contextualism.” This means that he offers detailed snapshots of a succession of discrete moments and of particular intellectual, political, and legal figures spread out over a very long stretch of time. The strategy is sometimes illuminating, but one has to mind the gaps. Most obviously, there are difficulties involved in leaping, as he does, almost immediately from ancient Rome to the seventeenth century. By the latter period, for instance, England’s “Wars of the Roses” were sometimes viewed and described in retrospect as civil wars. But at the time, in the 1400s, commentators do not seem to have resorted to medieval Latin phrases such as *bella civilia* or *guerre civiles* to describe these particular domestic and dynastic conflicts. Although classical texts such as Lucan’s *De Bello Civile* were known to medieval scholars, the impress of this ancient Roman inheritance on contemporary interpretations of fifteenth-century England’s internal wars does not appear to have been a vital one.

Why might this have been? The question could be rephrased. Why should it be imagined that language and concepts drawn from the ancient Roman past supplied the only or even the dominant ideas and methods for subsequent Westerners wanting to make sense of the experience of large-scale civil contention and slaughter? After all, in the medieval era and long after, most men and even more women possessed no direct knowledge of the Roman classics. Multitudes in Europe and everywhere else could not even read, never mind afford books. Yet in the past as now, it was precisely these sorts of “ordinary” people who were often the most vulnerable to the chaos and bloodshed of civil warfare, and so had little choice but to work out some ideas about it. What were these ideas?

A practitioner of intellectual history from the so-called Cambridge School of that discipline, Armitage barely touches on such questions. More international in range than many of his fellow scholars, he shares some of this school’s leading characteristics: its fascination with the long-term impact of Aristotelian and Roman republicanism, its overwhelming focus on language and on erudite elite males, and its comparative neglect of religious texts. It is partly this deliberately selective approach to the past and its sources that allows Armitage to venture on such an enormous topic over such a *longue*

*durée*. But again, there is a mismatch between this methodology and the full extent and vital diversity of his subject.

To be sure, many of the impressive individuals who feature in his book were much more than desk-bound intellectuals or sheltered and austere political players. One of the most striking segments in *Civil Wars* is Armitage’s treatment of the multiple roles of the Prussian-born American lawyer Francis Lieber, who provided Lincoln with a legal code for the conduct of the Civil War. Lieber had fought at Waterloo and was left for dead on the battlefield. During the 1860s, he also had to bear the death of one of his sons who fought for the South, even as two others were fighting for the North. As he remarked:



Syrian civilians in the rebel-held al-Shaar neighborhood of Aleppo, which was recently recaptured by government forces, March 2017

“Civil War has thus knocked loudly at our own door.” The fact remains, however, that most men caught up in civil wars throughout history have not been educated, prosperous, and high-achieving souls of this sort. Moreover—and this has a wide significance—civil wars have often been viewed as having a particular impact on women.

In harsh reality, even conventional warfare has usually damaged non-combatants, women, children, the elderly, and the infirm. Nonetheless, the idea long persisted that war was quintessentially a separate, masculine province. But civil wars were seen as taking place within, and cutting across, discrete societies. Consequently, by their very nature, they seemed likely to violate this separation of spheres, with women along with children and the old and frail all patently involved. This was a prime reason why civil warfare was so often characterized in different cultures not just as evil and catastrophic, but as unnatural. In turn, this helps to explain why people experiencing such conflicts have often resorted, far more avidly than to any other source of ideas, to religious language and texts for explanations as well as comfort.

The major holy books all contain allusions to civil warfare and/or lines that can be read as addressing its horrors. “I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians,” declares the King James version of the book of Isaiah: “and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour.” It was often the Apocalypse, though, as dem-

onstrated by Benjamin West’s great canvas, that Christians mined for terrifying and allusive imagery. Such biblical borrowings sometimes crowded out references to the Roman classics as a means of evoking and explaining civil war altogether, as seems often to have happened in medieval England.

At other times, religious and classical imagery and arguments were combined. Thus, as Armitage describes, the English poet Samuel Daniel drew on Lucan’s verses on the Roman civil war when composing his own *First Fowre Bookes of the Civile Wars between the Two Houses of Lancaster and Yorke* in 1595, a work plundered for its plots and characters by William Shakespeare. But it is also easy to see in portions of Daniel’s text the influence of the Apocalypse:

*Red fiery dragons in the aire doe flie,  
And burning Meteors, poynted-streaming lights,  
Bright starres in midst of day appeare in skie,  
Prodigious monsters, gastly fearefull sights:  
Straunge Ghosts, and apparitions terrifie,  
... Nature all out of course to checke our course,  
Neglects her worke to worke in us remorse.*

It was never just Christians who turned to holy books and religious pieties so as to cast some light on the darkness of civil war. Unlike allusions to the Roman past, such responses seem to have been universal. Indeed, I suspect that the only way that a genuinely transcontinental and socially deep history of civil warfare could conceivably be written would be through an examination of how civil wars have been treated by the world’s various religions, and how such texts and interpretations have been used and understood over time. In particular, the idea that Samuel Daniel hints at in the passage quoted above—that civil war was a punishment for a people’s more than usually egregious sins—has proved strikingly ecumenical as well as persistent.

Thus for Sunni Muslims, the idea of civil war as *fitna* has been central to understandings of the past. But *fitna* in this theology connotes more than civil warfare. The term can evoke sexual temptation, moral depravity—once again, sin. The First Fitna, for instance, the war of succession between 656 and 661, is traditionally viewed by Sunnis as marking the end of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the true followers of Muhammad.

As Tobie Meyer-Fong has shown, the civil wars that killed over twenty million Chinese in the 1850s and 1860s, the so-called Taiping Rebellion, were also often interpreted as divine retribution for immoral, decadent, or irreligious behavior.\* Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist commentators on all sides rationalized the carnage and disorder in these terms. Poor, illiterate Chinese caught up in this crisis seem also to have regularly turned to religion to make sense of it, and not simply out of faith, or as a means to explain

apparently arbitrary horrors. By viewing civil war as punishment for Chinese society’s sins *in general*, they could also secure for themselves a strategy and a possible way out, even if only in spiritual terms. They could make extra and conscious efforts to follow a moral pathway, and hope thereby to evade heaven’s condemnation.

Analogous responses and patterns of belief continue today, and understandably so. As the ongoing civil warfare in Syria illustrates all too terribly, vulnerable people caught up in such ordeals can easily be left feeling that no other aid is available to them except a deity, and that the only alternative is despair. David Armitage concludes his book with a discussion of how the “long-term decline of wars between states” (a decline that should not be relied on) has been “accompanied by the rise of wars within them.” As in his previous book, *The History Manifesto* (2014), co-written with Jo Guldi, he also insists that historians have a duty—and a particular capacity—to address such large and recurrent features of human experience:

Where a philosopher, a lawyer, or even a political scientist might find only confusion in disputes over the term “civil war,” the historian scents opportunity. All definitions of civil war are necessarily contextual and conflictual. The historian’s task is not to come up with a better one, on which all sides could agree, but to ask where such competing conceptions came from, what they have meant, and how they arose from the experience of those who lived through what was called by that name or who have attempted to understand it in the past.

Certainly, a close reading of *Civil Wars* provides a deeper understanding of some of the semantic strategies that are still being deployed in regard to this mode of warfare. Thus President Bashar al-Assad and his supporters frequently represent Syria’s current troubles as the result of rebellion, revolt, or treason; while for some of his Russian allies, resistance in that country is to be categorized as terrorism.

But historians can illumine the rash of civil warfare that has characterized recent decades more deeply than this. Whereas Armitage focuses here on the making and unmaking of states, it is the rise and fall of empires that have often been the fundamental precipitants of twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century civil wars. At one level, the decline and demise of some old, mainly land-based empires—Austrian, Ottoman, and Soviet—have contributed to a succession of troubles in Eastern Europe. At another, the old maritime empires that invaded so much of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East frequently imposed new boundaries and yoked together different peoples in those regions in ways that were never likely to endure, and stoked up troubles for the future. In these and other respects, Armitage is right to insist that history can equip men and women with a better understanding of the past and of the troubled present. It always has done this. But only when its practitioners have been willing to adopt broad and diverse and not just long perspectives. □

\*Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* (Stanford University Press, 2013).



# A Game of Love and Chance

Tim Parks

## Martutene

by Ramon Saizarbitoria,  
translated from the Basque  
by Aritz Branton,  
and edited by Cecilia Ross.  
Madrid: Hispabooks,  
815 pp., \$19.95 (paper)

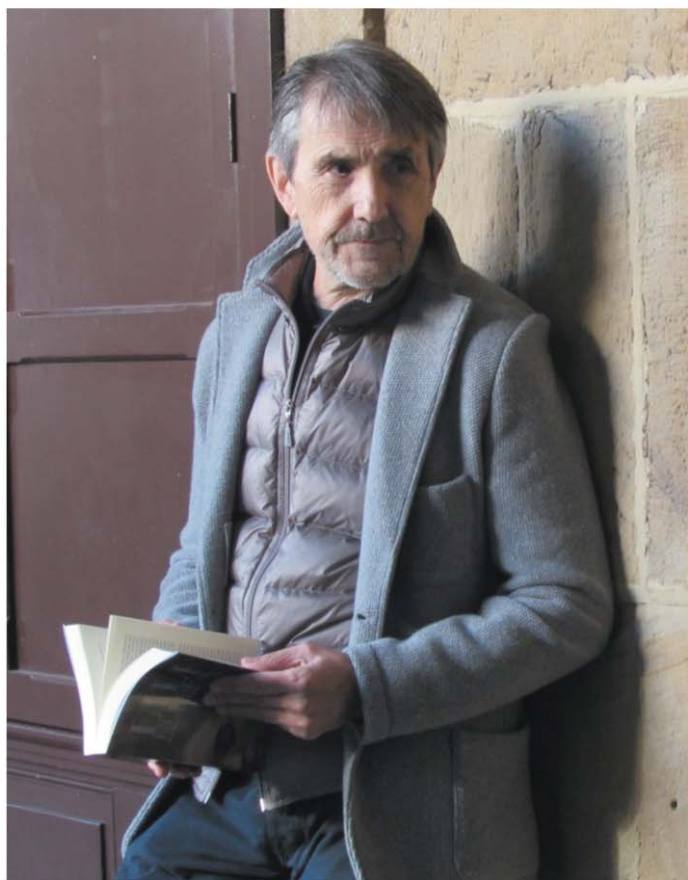
A middle-aged married mother flying from Heathrow to Bilbao becomes fascinated by a bearded man boarding the same plane. When a bag he's holding breaks, spilling books into the aisle, she gives him a good strong Harrods bag and helps gather the books up. Grateful, and despite the crowd of frustrated passengers trying to get to their seats, the man reads a few words from one that has fallen open—"This book was written in good faith"—and offers it to the woman as a gift.

For weeks and months afterward she will regret not having accepted the book, not having made contact with this "intellectual looking" man who comes to infatuate her. It's true men are "cowardly," she reflects, but she too has not "been brave enough." Desperate to track him down, she contacts Iberia Airlines, telling all kinds of lies to find out the identity of the passenger with the books. In the end, she will be exploited by an airline employee who makes inquiries on her behalf in return for drinks and even sex. On the very last pages of this eight-hundred-page novel, she will find her man again at Bilbao Airport. Their meeting is not described. This is Harri's story.

A writer, male, and his translator, female, again in middle age, are on the brink of breaking up, their long relationship worn down by the writer's monstrous self-regard. The translator spends her days compiling an archive of all the phrases the writer has underlined in the many books he has read. Well-established and well-heeled but desperately afraid of dying, the writer writes about another writer, his terminally ill alter ego Faustino Iturbe, and Iturbe's troubled relationship with his partner Flora Ugalde ("misery is the only thing he's given [her]"), who resembles the writer's actual partner right down to the very obvious "mole on her jugular fossa."

The translator has learned to access the writer's computer, which he supposes is defended by a password, in order to read what he is writing about her and will eventually ask her to translate. Her dealings with other people are conditioned by her awareness that, having read the famous writer's books, they know everything about her intimate life, at least as seen from his point of view—for example, the time she betrayed him and received a poem from her younger lover praising her for being "loyal, more loyal than anyone." It is something the writer will never let her forget, though he is hardly without sin, one of his own betrayals having led to her contracting a venereal infection.

The only thing this unhappy couple seem genuinely to share is a preference for literature over life. They live in books and for books, often comparing their relationship with that of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Most of all, they prefer books about books and writing about writing. In the



Ramon Saizarbitoria in Donostia, the Basque name for San Sebastián in northern Spain, 2015

final pages of *Martutene*, the translator at last finds the courage to break up with the writer and plan a book of her own, but he seems determined to win her back, with embarrassing displays of self-pity. This is Martin and Julia's story.

Abaitua and his wife Pilar, also in middle age, are likewise on the edge of a breakup. Or so it seems. Like Martin and Julia they have ceased to sleep together, though they do at least sleep in the same house and share the same bathroom. In fact it is mostly in or around the bathroom, in various states of undress, that they are painfully conscious of the fact that they are no longer lovers. Abaitua is a gynecologist in a public hospital, his wife a neurosurgeon in a private clinic owned by her ailing father. Abaitua is afraid of denouncing the various corrupt practices in the hospital and in general hyperattentive to what his colleagues and patients think of him, while Pilar is anxious that, following her father's death, other members of the family will sell the clinic to real estate developers, depriving her of her vocation.

In the hospital, Abaitua meets Lynn, a young American sociologist from Columbia University who is collecting data on infant mortality, and begins an affair with her. Relaxed, free, and full of confidence, she encourages him to be brave and stand up for what he believes. Though he never finds the courage to tell her he loves her or to leave his wife, her inebriating influence does

persuade him to denounce a senior surgeon and offer succor to a mistreated patient. As a result of this he is suspended from the hospital at exactly the moment he leaves Lynn.

The various characters are connected. Near the beginning of the novel, Abaitua examines the senile and incontinent mother of his old friend Kepa, who explains that he has left his wife after an argument over a Harrods bag that someone gave him on the flight back from London; he had insisted he bought only secondhand books in London, for the bookshop he runs, but after seeing the bag, his wife was convinced he was lying. So Kepa, who has now moved in with his dying mother, is the man of Harri's dreams.

Harri herself is an epidemiologist in Abaitua's hospital and an old friend of Martin's; Julia, the translator, is convinced the two slept together in the past. In the opening pages of the novel Harri is telling Martin and Julia the story of her airport infatuation when a new tenant arrives for the penthouse apartment in Martin's house—Lynn. Martin calls Lynn "the penthouse girl" and seems eager to impress, perhaps seduce, her.

In her early thirties, Lynn is as bookish as the others, and when Harri mentions the line "This book was written in good faith" she observes that these famous words, from the preface to Montaigne's essays, are quoted on the opening page of Max Frisch's autobiographical novel *Montauk*, which describes the Swiss author's brief affair, in old age, with his young American

publicist, also called Lynn; the defining characteristic of their story is that they would love each other intensely, with no fears for the future, no guilt, and, above all, no consequences.

Throughout the coming relationship with Abaitua, Frisch's wish that "Lynn will not become the name for guilt" (Frisch was married at the time) is repeated by both lovers, indicating a fear that this will inevitably happen. All the characters in *Martutene* now read *Montauk*, the novel they suppose was dropped on the plane, drawing frequent parallels between their lives and the book, which ties them together in a web of complicity and gives them a literary frisson they all seem to appreciate.

Abaitua goes on a walking holiday with his friend Kepa and invites Lynn to join them, allowing their affair to begin. Since Lynn's apartment is above Martin's bedroom, their noisy lovemaking in the coming months will keep the writer awake, intensifying his irritation and self-pity and reminding him and Julia of their own previous betrayals and present lack of physical affection. Both Julia and Harri go to Abaitua with their gynecological problems, Julia recalling how the doctor treated her when she picked up the venereal infection from Martin, Harri discovering she has breast cancer and needs immediate and radical surgery. Lynn too, despite her exuberance, will discover that she has a pituitary tumor and will arrange to be operated on in the private clinic designated by her insurance company. When the scheduled surgeon doesn't turn up, it is Abaitua's wife Pilar who steps in to operate on her husband's mistress.

Described like this we could imagine *Martutene* as the kind of farce Alan Ayckbourn slyly staged or John Updike embellished in glittering prose, a story of hapless, middle-class liberals that would be entirely credible anywhere in the Western world. Even the location of Martin's house, in sight of the local railway station and the clinic, a place that so many of the characters must pass by, and then the situation of the penthouse apartment with its outside staircase where the characters can hardly help but bump into one another, seem perfectly contrived for light comedy.

Yet this is never the tone of this huge, mostly solemn novel, and these blatant fictional contrivances are hardly noticeable when spread out across a work of some 350,000 words (about the length of *The Brothers Karamazov*). In general, the author's commitment to evoking his characters' daily lives, conversations, and, above all, thoughts in quite extraordinary detail is so evident from the outset that the reader has no choice but to treat the book with the utmost seriousness or abandon it at once.

*Martutene* is in fact a suburb of San Sebastián in northern Spain some ten miles from the French border. However, in this novel the town is given its local name, Donostia, for this is the Basque country, and *Martutene*, by Ramon Saizarbitoria—a sociologist and author, now in his seventies and with some sixteen books to his

Estíxiz Zabala/Itxauloko Hitza

name—was written not in Spanish but in Basque, a language spoken by only half of the two million inhabitants of this long-disputed region. The novel is translated by Aritz Branton, a native Basque speaker, with Cecilia Ross credited as editor; whatever the division of labor, the overall result is a fluent if somewhat monotonous prose that hardly shifts register or rhythm from beginning to end.

Saizarbitoria's fictional writer, Martin, also writes in Basque, despite the fact that he has a greater range and ease of expression in Spanish. The publisher, Hispabooks, presents *Martutene* as the greatest Basque novel ever written (it has the colors of the Basque national flag on the cover), though I doubt I am alone in not being aware of other Basque novels or Basque authors. The work thus presents itself as one that, in this time of globalization, addresses the international metropolitan community from the provinces, demanding recognition for an old and highly specific culture in a larger world that threatens to become a monoculture.

This in part explains the novel's length. We are to learn everything about the Basque country. We are to visit restaurants with Basque specialties. We are to follow discussions about Basque poets, Basque politics, Basque history, and Basque customs of every kind. When Abaitua and Kepa take Lynn on their walking holiday, we discover the Basque landscape and learn about the relation of French Basques and Spanish Basques. In Place Jean Moulin in Bordeaux, the statue known as *Gloria Victis* (Glory to the Vanquished), which depicts an angel supporting the body of a dead soldier, though originally designed to "celebrate" the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, is allowed to extend its poignancy across the blighted struggle for Basque independence:

Sweet defeat... the sculpture transmits the idea of a sweet defeat.... Abaitua was brought up in the culture of defeat.... That's what his parents had passed onto him—defeat, if dignified, is beautiful.

Here we approach the book's claim to high seriousness. The position of all the characters in regard to one another, their loves, and their careers, is to be understood with respect to their relationship to Basque identity, particularly the armed struggle for Basque independence that ended only in 2011 when the ETA (the armed Basque separatist movement) declared a final cessation of hostilities. So at the opening of the novel we learn that Harri is in England to take her daughter to a boarding school where she can be away from "the conflict." On the plane home she is reading a history of Basque nationalism and worries that this right-wing book might put off the man she is attracted to, though she is partly attracted to him because he looks "like your typical Basque man."

Before living with Martin, the translator Julia was married to an ETA fighter who died in suspicious circumstances, having left a sealed envelope to give to their son on his fifteenth birthday. The boy, now fourteen, was baptized Zigor, his father's nom de guerre. It's "a name from the Middle Ages," Julia explains to Lynn, that "in

Basque... means 'whip' or 'punishment.'" Is the dead man to be thought of as a warrior, a martyr, or a terrorist? Did he kill people? Was he himself killed? Different members of the family hold different views.

The young Zigor is involved in a school project to gather testimonies from the older members of the community about their experiences in the Spanish civil war. He is becoming interested in Basque history. Is his father's letter, from a violent past, going to encourage the boy to fight for Basque independence? Julia doesn't want the father "to determine his existence in any way other than genetically." She isn't even sure she should give him the letter.

This tension Julia experiences, between a deep attachment to Basque

asks a friend—who habitually checks for bombs beneath his car. This is because his son, at university, had allowed some of his friends to use the family's small yacht moored in the bay, and they had taken advantage of this to store arms on it. On discovering the situation, Abaitua went to the police and the boys were arrested, but not his son. He fears reprisals and he wishes his son would emigrate to the US. A nurse at the hospital has a son in prison on terrorist charges. Abaitua suspects she despises him.

In general he feels people are always checking his commitment to Basque identity. He wonders if one of his patients switched to another gynecologist over the matter and is morbidly aware of whether people address him in Basque or Spanish. At home his



Max Frisch with Alice Locke-Carey, who is called Lynn in Frisch's novel *Montauk*, Graz, Austria, 1981

identity and a weariness with the associated violence, informs her preference for literature over life. The opening pages of *Martutene*, which are seen largely from Julia's point of view, are full of the names of writers—Blake, Nabokov, Flaubert, Beckett, Proust, Pascal, Woolf, Sartre—who constitute the extended virtual community she feels safe in. Almost anyone Julia meets or speaks of is immediately likened to someone from this international artistic group. A man talking loudly outside a cinema "looks slightly like Chabrol." Coming down the stairs in a white polo shirt, Martin "looks like F. Scott Fitzgerald." He uses a "Hemingway-style notebook." A book cover looks like a Hopper painting. And so on.

Basque literature, on the contrary, is not safe territory. It has shown "considerable tolerance for violence," Julia reflects. "Many writers and particularly our people's poets... have encouraged it." She "wanted the violence to stop before Basque patriotism was completely ruined by it... before Basque society became a sad case of collective cowardice." Nevertheless, "having to deny dreams and feelings that she thought beautiful, that were part of her character, just because they once fed some people's madness hurts her." A weariness hangs over *Martutene*, a toxic blend of exhaustion, fearfulness, and guilt, to which only Lynn, the charming and ingenuous American, is immune.

When the novel's point of view is not with Julia, it passes to the equally anxious and self-conscious Abaitua—aren't you "bored of being Basque," he

wife, Pilar, tends to speak Spanish, despite having a Basque father, since he was a Franco supporter and believed the Basque country should be part of a united Spain.

As the novel progresses we realize that certain characters are linked by old resentments. During the civil war, Martin's separatist parents fled to France while Pilar's father appropriated his family's land to build his clinic. Martin himself as a young man had been a friend of Kepa's in the separatist movement. Their juvenile attempt to rob a bank in order to finance the organization ended in farce because the nervous Martin brought his dog along for company and insisted on using his own car, which he knew he could drive, rather than a stolen car he feared he might have trouble with. It is one of the book's few truly comic anecdotes.

Martin also failed to intervene manfully when Julia betrayed him. The novel he is writing—*The Man in Front of the Mirror*—tells of a novelist whose characters are "mostly men and women in relationships waiting for a story, their own story, to begin." The novelist himself "tries on stories in the same way that some other people try on suits." It seems that the paralysis of living in the aftermath of a failed political struggle prevents anyone from seeing a clear way forward. Even Martin's interminable writer's block—he should have finished his novel ages ago—is part of this Basque impasse.

What a relief, then, for these weary folk to welcome the American, Lynn,

into their local lives and enjoy telling her about Basque folk traditions and the Basque language. The book is peppered with unpronounceable-looking Basque words, and Lynn is incorrigibly cheerful as she picks them up. "*Zertaz pentsatzen?*" She asks Abaitua in Basque what he's thinking about. And again: "She asks how to say *tender* in Basque. '*Samur*.' *Samurra zara*. You're tender." Clearly this is a nudge to readers to see ourselves in the same position as Lynn, to understand that for these intellectual Basques, national identity becomes a harmless pleasure only when it can be presented to someone from outside their world, someone like ourselves, the international liberal reader, someone who knows to shun violence and appreciate a small nation's cultural specificity.

What a pleasure, too, for Martin, Julia, and Abaitua to find in Max Frisch's *Montauk* a story that sets their own stalled stories in motion, allowing them to dream of an intense experience that will not, like the Basque struggle, have negative consequences. Amid *Martutene*'s endless meandering, its obsessive attention to detail, Julia's desire not to be a character in Martin's books and Harri's resentment that she has never been one, *Montauk* pops up again and again (128 times to be precise), in French and German and English and Spanish editions, offering our characters the possibility of shape and clarity.

When Martin orders a Ping-Pong table, Julia reflects, "It's obvious he's bought the Ping-Pong table to be able to play with his young tenant, because in *Montauk*, the writer called Max also enjoys playing Ping-Pong with the young woman called Lynn." As for Abaitua, he "can't stop thinking about different scenes from *Montauk* that seem to fit the situation." When he, Kepa, and Lynn stay in a hotel together, there is much discussion of a discrepancy in the Spanish translation of *Montauk* that suggests that when Frisch and his Lynn stayed in a hotel together, Frisch was irritated, not nobly, because Lynn had discovered how much he was paying for their luxurious room, but meanly, by the thought that she might not discover how generous he was being. The Spanish translator's betrayal here is discussed again and again, reminding us of the importance of loyalty to an embattled and betrayed community.

All the characters are astonished, even appalled, to discover in Peter Noll's book *In the Face of Death*, which Julia comes across in Kepa's bookshop, that Frisch's affair with Lynn had not in reality been without consequences; to the contrary, Frisch later sought her out, and the two lived together for some years. Abaitua's affair with Lynn will also have an aftermath, in their case disastrous, confirming the generally fearful atmosphere of the book.

All these connections and reflections make sense in retrospect, but during my reading of *Martutene* it seemed I was plowing through one long aimless paragraph after another, as if, like his hero Martin, Ramon Saizarbitoria was unable or unwilling to take his creations in any decisive direction. Or perhaps he is simply a master of transmitting that special mood of ennui, self-importance, and defeatism that his Basque characters all share. □



# Will the Death Penalty Ever Die?

Jed S. Rakoff

## Courting Death: The Supreme Court and Capital Punishment

by Carol S. Steiker  
and Jordan M. Steiker.  
Belknap Press/Harvard University  
Press, 390 pp., \$29.95

When my older brother Jan David Rakoff was murdered in 1985, bolts of anger and outrage not infrequently penetrated the black cloud of my grief. Though I knew almost nothing about Jan's confessed murderer except his name, I wished him dead.

My brother, aged forty-four, had just begun to come into his own. His innovative educational theories were starting to attract attention, and, just as important, he had come to terms with his homosexuality, which for many years he had struggled to suppress. While on a trip to Manila, he engaged the services of a male prostitute, but at the end they quarreled over money. In a fit of rage, the prostitute assaulted my brother with a pipe burner and an ice pick, bludgeoning and stabbing him to death. To cover his tracks, the prostitute then set fire to the bungalow where my brother was staying; but the smoke attracted the attention of a security guard, who apprehended the fleeing assailant. Later that evening, the prostitute provided a full written confession.

When my brother's body arrived back in the United States, his face and head were barely recognizable, so vicious had been the assault. My heart cried out for vengeance. Although the death penalty was then available in the Philippines, the defendant, taking full advantage of a corrupt legal system, negotiated a sentence of just three years in prison. Had, instead, the prosecutor recommended the death penalty, I would have applauded.

It took many years before I changed my mind.

The law professors Carol S. Steiker and Jordan M. Steiker (sister and brother) have written a revealing book about the history of the death penalty in the US and, in particular, the continued difficulties the Supreme Court has had in attempting to regulate capital punishment so that it conforms to constitutional standards. If I have a criticism of their otherwise trenchant account, it is of their failure to give more than passing attention to the moral outrage that provides much of the emotional support for the death penalty—outrage felt not only by the family and friends of a murder victim, but also by the many empathetic members of the public who, having learned the brutal facts of the murder, feel strongly that the murderer has forfeited his own right to live.

For the Steikers, the debate over the death penalty is “first and foremost” a symbolic battle over cultural values, with a strong current of racism running just below the surface. This may well be true, but unless one acknowledges that rational human beings can feel such revulsion at the taking of an innocent life as to wish the taker dead, one misses part of the reason that the death penalty continues to enjoy significant popular support, even in many of the states and countries that have banned it.

At the same time, it can hardly be denied that the death penalty is imposed in this country in a racially unjust manner. As the Steikers fully document, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even now, death sentences are disproportionately imposed on black men who commit crimes against whites, especially white women, and those who are actually executed are even more disproportionately men of color. While most states still permit the sentence of capital punishment, it is mainly in the South that executions take place, reflecting, in the Steikers' view, “the South's historical practice of chattel slavery and of slavery's enduring racial legacy.”

The confinement of executions chiefly to the southern states is also the product, according to the Steikers, of the South's history of violent racial tension. Legal executions aside, more than three thousand people were lynched in the South between 1880 and 1930, nearly all of them black men, whereas there were comparatively few lynchings in the West and virtually none in the North. As the Steikers note, “One of the strongest predictors of a state's propensity to conduct executions today is its history of lynch mob activity more than a century ago.”

Since the death penalty is primarily imposed on southern black males, it is hardly surprising that the first successful attacks on capital punishment in the Supreme Court were led by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Somewhat ironically, however, the NAACP and its lawyers found that their most successful strategy was to attack capital punishment not so much on the ground that it was racially unjust, but rather on the ground that it was imposed in a way so lacking in standards as to be unconstitutionally arbitrary. It was on this ground that the Supreme Court, in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972), held the death penalty unconstitutional as then applied.

Although there was no single opinion in *Furman* that commanded a majority of the Court, the largest plurality of justices joined an opinion by Justice Potter Stewart that read in part as follows:

These death sentences are cruel and unusual in the same way that being struck by lightning is cruel and unusual. For, of all the people convicted of rapes and murders in 1967 and 1968, many just as reprehensible as these, the petitioners are among a capriciously selected random handful upon whom the sentence of death has in fact been imposed. My concurring Brothers [Justices Thurgood Marshall and William O. Douglas] have demonstrated that, if any basis can be discerned for the selection of these few to be sentenced to die, it is the constitutionally impermissible basis of race.... But racial discrimination has not been

proved, and I put it to one side. I simply conclude that the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments cannot tolerate the infliction of a sentence of death under legal systems that permit this unique penalty to be so wantonly and so freakishly imposed.

Whatever its rationale, *Furman* suspended the death penalty—but not for long. Responding to Justice Stewart's opinion that the death penalty was un-



Arkansas death row inmate Ledell Lee, convicted of a 1993 murder that he maintained he did not commit, at a court hearing in Little Rock, April 18, 2017. With the help of the Innocence Project and the ACLU, Lee requested a stay of execution in order to prove his innocence with DNA testing, but the Supreme Court rejected his appeal, and he was executed on April 20, days before the expiration of one of the drugs involved in the lethal injection.

constitutional because it was imposed in an arbitrary fashion, no fewer than thirty-five states, in the space of less than four years, enacted statutes supplying standards that supposedly would apply the death penalty in a nonarbitrary way. In 1976, in the case of *Gregg v. Georgia*, the Supreme Court upheld these laws, and capital punishment was restored.

Since then and until fairly recently, the history of the death penalty in the Supreme Court has largely been a matter of reviewing and refining these standards, which in most jurisdictions take the form of “aggravating” and “mitigating” factors that a judge or jury must consider in deciding whether or not to impose the death penalty. As the Steikers show in devastating detail, this “regulatory” approach (as they term it) has been something of a disaster. For one thing, the Supreme Court has mandated that the standards not be so rigid or precise as to deprive judges and juries of meaningful discretion to take account of the particulars of each case. But this in turn has led the Court to approve broad and vague standards that, in practice, accord judges and juries the same unfettered discretion that led to the problem of arbitrariness that the plurality in *Furman* condemned.

For example, a common aggravat-

ing factor that a judge or jury is supposed to consider in deciding whether to impose the death penalty on someone convicted of murder is whether the defendant committed the murder in the course of committing some other crime. But the list of such other crimes—typically including rape, robbery, burglary, assault, and so forth—is frequently so all-encompassing as to apply to the great majority of situations in which murders are committed. So this factor does little to meaningfully

limit or define the exercise of discretion. Another common aggravating factor is that the defendant exhibited “utter disregard for human life” when he committed the murder. How many murderers cannot be fit into this category? And doesn't this mean that, in practice, imposition of the death penalty is still effectively standardless?

Moreover, litigation over the wording and application of these standards, coupled with many judges' growing discomfort with the death penalty, has led to years-long delays between the imposition of the death penalty and the actual execution. This has effectively deprived the death penalty of much of the supposed retributive and deterrent force that, as the Supreme Court held in *Gregg*, justified its imposition.

As noted by Justice Stephen Breyer, dissenting in the recent case of *Glossip v. Gross* (2015), these “unconscionably long delays... undermine the death penalty's penological purpose.” Even Congress's attempt in 1996 to reduce such delays through the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) has proven totally ineffective in this respect (though AEDPA has had the terrible collateral effect of largely eliminating meaningful federal review of violations of defendants' rights in noncapital cases). Notwithstanding AEDPA, the time between imposition of the death penalty and actual execution is now, on average, fifteen years.

Further still, the costs of all this litigation and delay—which are chiefly borne not by the federal or even state governments but by local communities—are huge, in some cases actually threatening to bankrupt the locality and in others diverting much-needed resources away from the rest of law enforcement. A state commission in California, for example, has determined that when one adds up the costs to the state and to local municipalities in California of litigating death penalty cases through their complicated proceedings, incarcerating the defendants in separate death-row facilities, constructing and maintaining execution chambers, and arranging for all the other special features of a death penalty case, the expense to the public of maintaining a death penalty system in California is more than ten times what the cost would be if the defendants

Benjamin Krain/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/AP Images



were sentenced instead to life imprisonment without parole.

In short, the Supreme Court's regulatory approach has proven endlessly slow, immensely expensive, counter-productive to the supposed purposes of the death penalty, and nearly as arbitrary as the system it replaced.

More recently, the Court has also begun to impose some limitations on the death penalty by holding it unconstitutional when applied to adolescents and to mentally disabled persons. But these decisions are premised on what is perceived by the Court's majority to be a national "consensus" on such issues, a rationale that seems unlikely to apply to capital punishment as a whole. Inevitably, these decisions have also engendered their own litigation, for example over what tests can properly be applied to determine if a defendant is mentally disabled.

Polls suggest that while a majority of Americans still favor the death penalty, they do so less strongly than they once did. This does not appear, however, to be a function of the regulatory problems discussed above. Partly it is a result of declining crime and murder rates. It can also be attributed, as the Steikers acknowledge, to the by now overwhelming evidence that the death penalty has been imposed in dozens, if not hundreds, of cases in which it was ultimately proven that the defendants were actually innocent.

The discovery that we were executing, or coming perilously close to executing, scores of wholly innocent people was originally the work of the Innocence

Project and its innovative use of DNA testing in cases, such as rape-related murders, in which samples of bodily fluids or tissues had been retained long after the convictions. In many such cases, DNA testing disclosed that the semen removed from the victim of a rape-murder was not that of the death row defendant convicted of the crime but rather of some other suspect whom the police had chosen not to pursue.

Other organizations eventually joined the Innocence Project in reopening closed cases, with the result that, according to a list maintained by the University of Michigan, dozens of defendants convicted of death-eligible offenses have now been completely exonerated by the courts, many after having spent years on death row. One can only imagine how many of the defendants who were actually executed were similarly innocent, but one widely accepted study puts the figure at no less than 4 percent.

It should also be noted that the main reasons for the wrongful convictions in death-eligible cases were inaccurate eyewitness identifications, perjured testimony, and flawed evidence from forensic experts. These problems are endemic to the American criminal justice system but not meaningfully addressed in any of the Supreme Court's death penalty decisions.

These exonerations may constitute only a small percentage of the exonerations yet to come. At present, testing for DNA can yield definitive results only in cases where the crime scene evidence consists of DNA mixtures from no more than two people, and in many cases, no crime scene DNA samples are available

at all. But much work has already been done toward developing effective ways to assess DNA samples containing the DNA of three or four or even more persons—so that, for example, one can determine who was, or was not, involved in a gang rape, or in an assault with a firearm handled by several persons. Such developments will doubtless provide proof leading to new exonerations (and new convictions). Similarly, fingerprint evidence, which in its current form is often unreliable because of the large measure of subjectivity involved in its interpretation, has been the subject of much recent work to improve its accuracy in ways that may likewise lead to further exonerations.

But what good are all these future possibilities of reliable exonerations if the defendants have already been put to death? It was on this basis that in 2002, in *United States v. Quinones*, I declared the federal death penalty unconstitutional. Specifically, I held that under the due process clause of the Constitution, an innocent person never loses his legal right to prove his innocence, but that he has been effectively deprived of that right if he is executed.

My decision was promptly reversed by a panel of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, which, wrongly in my view, interpreted a 1993 Supreme Court case, *Herrera v. Collins*, as holding that even an innocent defendant eventually loses his right to be exonerated by proving his innocence (even though the critical fifth vote for the majority in *Herrera*, by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor,

expressly stated the contrary). But because of that interpretation, the Steikers, after kindly mentioning my decision, conclude that "powerful as the innocence issue may be as a policy concern, the lack of precedent supporting the argument likely undermines its use as the sole ground for a constitutional attack on the death penalty."

Perhaps they are right. But it still seems to me that the execution or near execution of the innocent is the factor most likely to deprive the death penalty of its moral force, and thereby its ultimate legal justification. For how can one applaud capital punishment knowing that those executed may well be innocent?

The Steikers instead express the hope that the death penalty—whose demise they fervently desire—will ultimately founder on the inability of the Supreme Court to devise a consistent and effective way of squaring it with *Furman*'s mandate that the ultimate punishment not be imposed in an irrational, arbitrary fashion. They conclude that the abolition, if it happens at all, will come about "because of particular features of the American terrain, most notably the failed and impossible effort to improve capital punishment with the lofty but limited power of the Constitution." But having detailed in their excellent book how ingrained support for the death penalty is in American culture and politics, they seem rather pessimistic about the future. One can only wonder how many more wrongly convicted, innocent people will have to go to the death chamber before these ingrained attitudes will change for others, as they did for me. □

# Mexico in the Full Light of Day

Enrique Krauze

## A Visit to Don Otavio:

### A Mexican Journey

by Sybille Bedford,  
with an introduction by Bruce Chatwin.  
New York Review Books,  
368 pp., \$18.95 (paper)

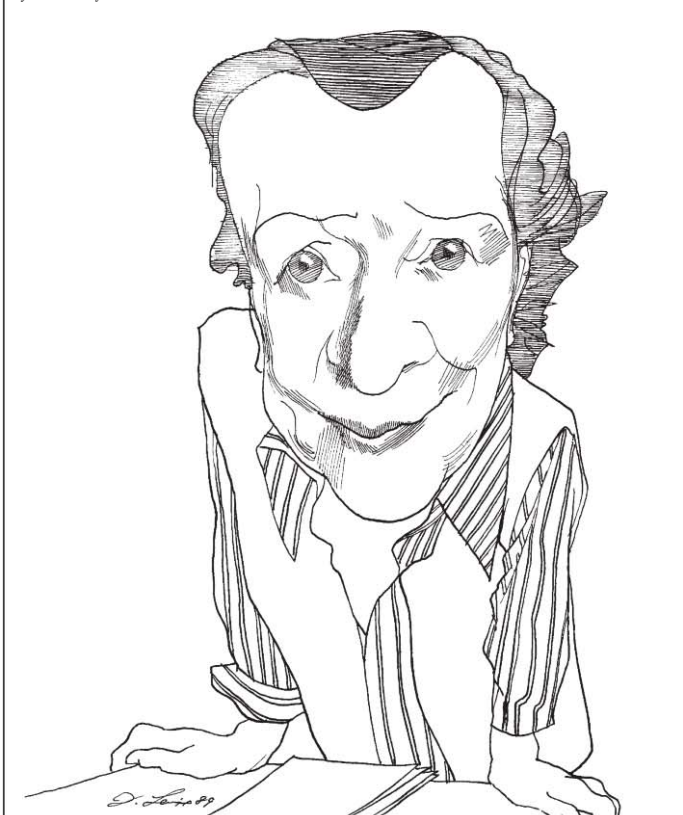
Many twentieth-century British travel books and novels about Mexico, including D. H. Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico* (1927), Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), Evelyn Waugh's *Robbery Under Law* (1939), and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), focus on the dark side of Mexican history, in a sense its violent night. But there is another, earlier tradition, much calmer and unfolding in the full light of day. The classic example of this is *Life in Mexico* by the Marquesa Fanny Calderón de la Barca (a Scotswoman born Frances Erskine Inglis, wife of the first Spanish ambassador to independent Mexico). The book is a collection of letters that Calderón wrote while visiting the country between 1839 and 1842.

It was her reading of *Life in Mexico* that in 1946 convinced Sybille Bedford to travel to Mexico, where she wrote her first book, *A Visit to Don Otavio*, originally published in 1953 as *The Sudden View*. In 1956, Bedford published *A Legacy*, probably the most important of her semiautobiographical novels.\* She went on to write three more novels and seven books of nonfiction before her death in 2006, all characterized by her crisp style and surprising turns of phrase.

Born in Germany in 1911, Bedford was educated in England and from the age of fourteen grew up with her mother and stepfather, who moved in the 1920s from Italy to Sanary-sur-Mer, in the South of France. There she became friendly with Aldous Huxley and associated with what she would later call a "galaxy" of German literary figures, among them Thomas Mann, Arnold Zweig, Franz Werfel, and Alma Mahler. Immediately following the outbreak of World War II, her open opposition to the Nazis and the fact of her Jewish ancestry convinced her that she could no longer live in France. Soon after, she left for the United States, where she lived until her journey to Mexico after the end of the war. As she writes at the beginning of *A Visit to Don Otavio*, "I had a great longing to move, to hear another language, eat new food; to be in a country with a long nasty history in the past and as little present history as possible."

Though *A Visit to Don Otavio* is basically a traveler's account of the year she spent in Mexico, in his admiring introduction Bruce Chatwin notes that Bedford thought of it as a novel. "I wanted to make something light and poetic," she told him. Much of the book recounts short but often eventful trips through cities and towns in the center, south, and west of the country—Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Morelia, Pátzcuaro, and Guadalajara—but the second part, the core of the book, is a somewhat picaresque tale based on a long visit to an old hacienda that she refers

Sybille Bedford



to as San Pedro Tlayacán, in the western state of Jalisco, by Bedford and her companion Esther Murphy Arthur (referred to in the book as "E."), she was a brilliant New York intellectual who never managed to write the books expected of her).

Their host, Don Otavio (for some reason spelled incorrectly, as the name should be Octavio), is a learned, pious, and chivalrous bachelor whose father had served as governor of Jalisco and adviser to the dictator Porfirio Díaz. His family has lost much of its fortune and, during the visit, Don Otavio and his three elder brothers discuss the possibility of turning the hacienda into a modern hotel. It lies on the shore of Lake Chapala, where Lawrence had written *The Plumed Serpent*. But Bedford's account of Mexico is very different from Lawrence's. She presents no cults of blood, indigenous priests, or sacrificial offerings. Instead there is nature in its full splendor—"blooms of camilla, jasmine and oleander and the fruits of pomegranate," "tall, tapering palms," and "striped birds as fantastically got up as cinquecento gondoliers."

The poetic sensitivity to nature, with its echoes of the many places Bedford had visited or lived, runs throughout the book. "Gray days are unknown... the sky is always clear," she says about Mexico City. She notes the effect of the clear air on the spirit of its inhabitants: "In the morning we are on the coast of New England.... Warmth lies gently across one's shoulders." By eleven o'clock the climate turns "continental" with a brief torrential rain that reminds Bedford of Egypt or Burma, and then suddenly "darkness descends with a

sudden extinguishing sweep like the cover on the canary's cage."

Bedford treats many aspects of Mexican culture and daily life with humor and grace: the slow passing of time, religious and civil fiestas (celebrated with "barbarity and opulence"), siestas and gunfights, bejeweled women and their sinful secrets, the music—about which Bedford, no fan of Mexican folk or public art, wrote, it "has to be endured to be believed"—and political gossip. Don Otavio, "the last relic of Mexican feudalism," employs a staff of seventeen servants, whose lives Bedford observes with delicacy, sweetness, and sometimes terror.

Completing the picture is a community of expatriates living on the shores of Lake Chapala: an irascible Englishman who hates Mexico ("dreadful savage country") and its "natives"; an elderly woman from Virginia who, years before, confronted Mexican revolutionaries with the same rifle that she sleeps with every night in the open air; an aristocratic Creole woman accompanied by a band of mariachis; a mysterious German healer; and the alcoholic town doctor.

The travels of the tireless Sybille and the impatient Esther take place after the revolution of the 1910s, the religious persecutions of the 1920s, the Cristero Uprising later that decade (in which rural Catholics rebelled against the anticlerical policies of the state), and the tormented years of the 1930s, when land and oil were nationalized. Although Mexico was still a predominantly rural country, the period after World War II saw the beginning of a

process of urbanization and industrialization that would significantly alter its landscape and society.

Bedford shows an impressive feeling for geography. Against the harmful perception of Mexico as a "horn of plenty" (as old as Cortés and still pervasive), she reads the country in a different way: "Mexico looks like the headless part of a large fish, hacked across the middle." Arid in the north, with tropical forests on its coasts, without navigable rivers, seamed by "two stupendous sierras," "slit by gorges, gashed by ravines, rent by chasms, blocked by volcanoes," the rugged surface of that "fish" is far less inviting than earlier romantic depictions of the country had suggested.

Like her predecessor Calderón de la Barca, Bedford uses all of her senses to describe Mexico. Her animated scenes and anecdotes are perspicacious and poetic, never condescending or merely picturesque. Every page contains some stylistic or factual surprise. To illustrate the incredible display of Mexican markets, she reproduces a letter written by the conquistador Hernán Cortés to Emperor Charles V. His description of markets in 1520 was still accurate in 1946 and continues to be so today.

But Bedford also notices something strange about markets in Mexico that sharply distinguishes them from Oriental bazaars: "There is no noise." Seeking to discover what lies beneath this silence, Bedford walks the streets, travels alongside turkeys on second-class Mexican buses, and talks to the many people she meets. (The real reasons for this comparative silence have to do with customary Indian behavior as well as a tradition of courtesy passed down from the Spanish empire—both features of Mexico that she notes at various points but does not probe.)

Rich Mexican muralist achievements (like all modern Mexican art and literature) don't at all interest Bedford, but she does at least look at pre-Hispanic sculpture: "You will never be further from Greece," she comments, and the eccentricity she sees in these figures seems to her symptomatic of "the haphazard, the absurd, the overblown, the savage, the gruesome," of which she finds examples everywhere in the country.

But for Bedford, who had lived as a child with her father—an impoverished aristocrat and consummate gourmet—an important means to understanding Mexican culture was through its cuisine, which she sees, as she sees most things, from a perspective tilted toward Europe:

The cooking of Mexico belongs loosely to the European Mediterranean. The link was obviously made by the Navigators and Spain; perhaps it was strengthened by some shared oriental affinities. The new food was a graft that took well. It suited the climate and the land, and joined quite naturally with the indigenous roots....

Similarly, she is at her most articulate and appreciative when writing about architecture and especially its

\*Reissued by New York Review Books in 2015.

similarities to the European forms she is familiar with. She deeply admires the palaces of Mexico City and other colonial centers (Morelia, Puebla, Guanajuato) that are constructed from local materials but as products of cultural mixing (*mestizaje*) have features reminiscent of Spanish and European buildings. While her friend Aldous Huxley thought that the cathedral of Taxco was “one of the most sumptuous and one of the most ugly” buildings he had ever encountered, Bedford considered it “a very splendid affair... shimmering with chromatic tiles.”

Wherever she goes, she is greeted with expressions like *beso sus pies* (“I kiss your feet”), *a sus órdenes* (“at your orders”), *si Usted lo permite* (“if you permit it”), and *que Dios las proteja* (“may God protect you”). Waiters, hotel employees, businessmen, gentlemen of high society, old generals, and beggars all practice the same old-fashioned courtesy, which charms her. Other aspects of Mexican life seemed to Bedford, and rightly so, surreal: the seller of sandals who refuses to fashion a pair for her because he has made enough money for the day, the new hotel without staircases or running water, the courses at an expensive restaurant delivered to her table all at once.

Bedford’s celebration of Mexican conviviality does not prevent her from noticing its harsher realities as well. She remains unfazed when a bus she is riding is robbed by masked bandits. Throughout the country, she discovers “corruption as a matter of course” and describes cantinas as places where “there is no singing, no music, human or mechanical, there are only

smells.” The rows of peasants sleeping on the sidewalks and the “vagrant camp-followers” in the sanctuaries—“prostrate, agape, chanting, swaying, scraping on their knees, hugging images with oriental intensity”—arouse in her not compassion but rather a sense that they are “unarrestable, frightening to the pitch of panic.” She feels this panic again on a rainy night when she is walking alone and sees “silent people sitting in doorways. Nothing happened, but I was seized by such a sense of desolation that several times I broke into a run.”

In her chapter “Money and the Tarascan Indians,” Bedford reflects on cultural differences in poverty. The setting is the lake region of Michoacán, inhabited entirely by indigenous peoples, where each ancient village manufactures distinct and complementary products (woolen blankets, chairs and cupboards, guitars and stringed *vihuelas*, pots and containers, hats, bells, fishing nets, fishhooks, tanned skins, metal products). The region’s agricultural practices are tenaciously pre-Hispanic, though its corrals are occupied by donkeys, goats, and poultry—animals imported by the Spaniards. “They grow what they eat and wear, and sometimes a little more.... There is sugar cane in the fields, tobacco grows in the kitchen garden and coffee in the shrubbery.” It is a communal arrangement that has remained intact since it was established in the sixteenth century by Father Vasco de Quiroga, who took inspiration from Thomas More’s *Utopia*. The Tarascans rarely use money and travel barefoot over great distances to markets. “The work is hard, but neither monotonous

nor mechanical,” writes Bedford, “and a man is largely his own master.”

It is a poor life, but poor for whom? Bedford notes that the Tarascans were masters of their implements and, collectively, of their land:

They have a feeling for ritual and form, and their intercourse with their deities appears to be easy and frequent.... They have leisure: freedom from possessions and that Western thorn, worry....

Her vision of their lives is romanticized but not idealized. She sees them as passionate, hard, and violent people. She acknowledges that they could benefit from “irrigation, conservation of rain-water, storage of grain... anaesthetics,” yet she recognizes that these improvements would be difficult to introduce. “They can hardly be dropped,” she writes, like a “gift-package or loan, into their pattern of existence without disrupting its balance and perhaps its very structure, leaving chaos.”

Though Bedford could not have known, her speculations at that moment would be relevant to an intense debate, in 1951, about Mexico’s economic and social organization. In his book *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (1950), Frank Tannenbaum advocated for the preservation and strengthening of community life in the Mexican countryside in order to avoid a mass exodus to the cities. But no one in power listened.

“This is not a Western country,” Bedford is told by a Spanish refugee at

a gathering in Coyoacán. Three centuries of Spanish colonization, from 1521 to 1821, had not transformed it into a fully Western country but neither had it become merely a replica of obscurantist Spain, closed to the spirit of science and the Enlightenment, which Bedford, as a good liberal, thoroughly despised. “They were very much alone,” Bedford writes of Mexicans, “severed from the established world, cut off from their place in the order of their time... and yet they were hamstrung, pinned to Spain, by a hundred bureaucratic ties.” Her impression strangely coincides with the ideas that Octavio Paz, in his *Labyrinth of Solitude*, was formulating during those same years.

Bedford narrates the events following Mexico’s independence, the “millennium... from Hidalgo’s revolt against Spanish rule until Calles’ suppression of the Spring Revolution of 1929,” as if it were a tragicomic parade:

Mexico has had a dozen full-blown constitutions and a larger number of Declarations of Independence and Reform.... In their time, some were called liberal, some radical, some centralized.... All followed as well as initiated a great deal of bloodshed.... Liberators, reformers and upholders of the Faith rushed about... murdering everyone in sight. Meanwhile the people got more poor and more confused, and in turn more angry, fatalistic, murderous or cowed.

She refers only in passing and quite superficially to the War of the Reform (1858–1861), which separated church



and state more thoroughly than in any other Latin American country. She initially describes the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) as “mild and remote and old-fashioned,” and concedes that “he managed—at a price—to establish internal peace, resume somewhat dilapidated foreign relations, and set out to attract foreign capital.” When he was in power, she writes, “the public aspect of the city [was] clean, safe and comfortable,” but she goes on to cast doubt on the depth of this “public aspect”:

The smug Edwardian cover pulled over a semi-barbarous country by a business-minded ex-soldier is a window dressing, not for home consumption. *There are no home consumers.*

But Bedford's engagement with Díaz is general and limited. His regime achieved a great deal of unprecedented material progress. It founded cities and built harbors, developed industry, commerce, and commercial agriculture, and unified an isolated and territorially divided country. Despite its accomplishments, however, it was a personal dictatorship, repressive and often bloody, and it lasted thirty-five years.

Bedford's account of Mexico's history, as detailed in brief passages throughout the book, contains a number of minor errors concerning dates, events, place names, and people, as well as more troubling omissions, especially of twentieth-century events. The book ignores the social achievements of the 1917 Constitution, the protections accorded to workers, the various distributions of land to the peasants, and the considerable (though not total) breaking up of the large haciendas. Nor does it mention the great educational and cultural crusade of José Vasconcelos, who hired hundreds of teachers and founded schools and libraries across the country; published editions of classic books, selling them at very low prices or simply giving them away in poor neighborhoods; and hired and commissioned work from the painters Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, with whom he helped invent Mexican Muralism.

The Mexican revolution is discussed quite superficially—without any mention of its results, good or bad, or of the political and social mythologies it inspired. The immense event seemed to her (more than anything) a farce. She does not even mention Emiliano Zapata's struggle for the rights of the peasantry in the 1910s, and she dismissively refers to Lázaro Cárdenas, the president in the 1930s who nationalized the Mexican oil industry and distributed some 42.5 million acres to peasants, as “so like Lenin and FDR.” Her notion (and specifics) of Mexico as having (she hoped) “as little present history as possible” led her to underestimate, and insufficiently account for, the complexity of Mexico's present history.

Bedford's true interest in the history of Mexico involves a focus on the lack of understanding between Mexico and Europe. This is evident in her repeated allusions to the ephemeral Mexican empire of Maximilian, the Hapsburg prince whom (with French support) Mexican conservatives installed as their emperor from 1864 to 1867, and

about whose life Bedford had read a great deal. She visits his former country home in Cuernavaca and composes an interesting series of reflections on the convergence of various historical forces after Maximilian's execution by the Mexican Republic in 1867. Imagining what would have happened if the South had won the American Civil War, she hypothesizes that France would have established its power in America, the United States and Germany would have developed different characteristics and degrees of international power, and perhaps the two world wars would never have happened.

Bedford is most penetrating when she considers the psychological complexity of Maximilian, a child (like herself) of European aristocracy lost in a country that he never truly under-

I was born and live in the landscape and society that Bedford faithfully depicts. Some of the features she describes are certainly still present: the mosaic of Mexican cuisine (more varied even than she, who never visited Yucatán, imagined), the multicolored markets, the adoration of flowers, the fiestas, and the music. Various “Don Otavios,” remnants of an earlier age, still take their evening walks through the streets of the provinces. The conviviality that Bedford observed remains the same. The tradition of courtesy and popular piety have not vanished. Nor have the baleful traditions of inequality (“gulf between class and class” as Bedford puts it), poverty, and corruption.

Other things have changed for the better. The Great Temple of the Az-



A market in Morelia, Michoacán, 1984; photograph by Alex Webb from *La Calle*, a collection of his images of Mexico, published by Aperture and the Televisa Foundation. For more on Webb's book, see Álvaro Enríquez's essay on the NYR Daily at [nybooks.com/lacalle](http://nybooks.com/lacalle).

stood but genuinely loved. When she is in Querétaro, the emperor's last refuge and the site of his execution, Bedford immerses herself in a long discussion of him and Benito Juárez, the Zapotec Indian president who ordered his death. It is the same subject as Franz Werfel's 1924 play *Juárez and Maximilian*. (Bedford came to know Werfel in Sanary, though she does not mention his work here.) Why, Bedford asks, did Juárez not spare Maximilian's life? She examines in detail the enormous difficulties that Juárez—“that brave and tenacious man”—had faced in order to construct a modern, westward-looking nation:

The answers were all stacked for Juárez. Maximilian had conspired against the legitimate government of Mexico; Maximilian had himself issued a decree putting under sentence of death any Mexican bearing arms against the monarchy; Maximilian was backed by powers contrary to the public welfare of the country....

Maximilian had broken the rules. To Juárez who had seen too many die, the rules were more lasting than life, and more important, and in such a case one can never ask, which rules?...

And why did Maximilian, abandoned by France, by Europe, and by his own family, decide to remain in Mexico? Because, Bedford suggests, he had gradually, intimately, and fatally identified with his adversary, whose liberal values he shared.

tes—mentioned by Bedford—has been fully excavated and can now be visited near the Zócalo, or main square, in Mexico City. There is a magnificent National Museum of Anthropology and the treasures of the colonial period are well preserved and are now visited by millions of people. The death rate has declined vertiginously, as has the degree of malnutrition. A significant middle class has been expanding for decades and the country has an incipient democracy, with a division of powers, elections overseen by the autonomous Federal Electoral Institute, a multiparty system, and more freedom of speech. Still, even though we have managed to moderate dictatorial or anarchic impulses, many Mexicans, faced with accumulating problems, expect and hope for a messiah, as Bedford predicted.

But the Mexico that Bedford grew to love is essentially gone. The old slow pace of time has sped up. Major crime is carried out not by masked bandits but by large criminal associations, often in collusion with local governments. The violence of the drug wars has escalated to levels not seen since the revolution. The degradation of rural conditions, due in part to a lack of support by the ruling elites, has driven the peasantry into a nomadic existence among the cities of Mexico and the United States. Mexico remains poised between its dark night of violence and its daylight of joy and energy, awaiting some new resolution.

—Translated from the Spanish by Hank Heifetz

# Trump's Constitutional Crisis

David Cole

James Comey is no saint. But thanks to Donald Trump, he is now a martyr. On May 9, in a twist that would have seemed far-fetched even on *House of Cards*, President Trump fired Comey as director of the FBI on the recommendation of Jeff Sessions, his attorney general. According to the administration, Trump did so not because Comey was investigating the possible collusion of Trump campaign officials with the Russian government but because of how Comey mishandled the investigation of Hillary Clinton's private e-mail server.

This nakedly concocted justification has caused deep alarm among leading members of both parties in Congress. If the president and his attorney general are firing the FBI director because of the FBI's investigation into the campaign that got the president elected—a campaign in which the attorney general had a direct part—it amounts to an obstruction of justice and an attempt to place the president above the law.

This is a constitutional crisis. The only way forward is to ensure an independent and credible investigation into the Trump campaign's ties to Russian meddling in the election and the administration's efforts to obstruct such an inquiry. This could be done by a special prosecutor or a select congressional committee or both.

The indications of unlawful behavior by the administration are strong. On March 2, Sessions expressly committed to recusing himself from the FBI's Russia investigation after it was reported that he had failed to disclose meetings with the Russian ambassador while advising Trump's campaign; so he should have had zero involvement in any decision affecting the investigation. Yet he did not recuse himself from the task of firing the man in charge of that very investigation. In fact, administration officials said Attorney General Sessions "had been charged with coming up with reasons to fire him," and Sessions directed his newly appointed deputy, Rod Rosenstein, to write a memo justifying Comey's dismissal.

Rosenstein appears to have conducted no original inquiry into Comey, but instead opportunistically cobbled together criticisms of his actions in connection with the Clinton e-mail investigation before Trump took office. Many commentators, myself included,\* argued last fall that Comey's actions were doubly improper. When he closed the investigation into Clinton's e-mails, after finding no evidence of criminal wrongdoing, he should not have held a press conference to excoriate her as "extremely careless." And when, just eleven days before the election, he briefly reopened the investigation upon learning that some Clinton e-mails had been discovered on the laptop of Huma Abedin's husband, Anthony Weiner, he should not have made that fact public, as it had a real risk of affecting the impending election.

However, Trump and his advisers notably did not previously share these criticisms of Comey. To the contrary,



Attorney General Jeff Sessions with now-fired FBI Director James Comey at a meeting of federal law enforcement officials at the Justice Department, Washington, D.C., February 2017

Trump's pronouncements—and those of his close adviser and now attorney general—show that his campaign went out of its way to endorse Comey's actions in the Clinton case. At the time, Trump, who had criticized Comey for letting Hillary Clinton off and promised to jail her if he were elected, said that Comey "brought back his reputation" by disclosing the reopening of the Clinton investigation. "It took a lot of guts," Sessions, one of Trump's most stalwart defenders throughout the campaign, said, "He had an absolute duty, in my opinion, eleven days or not, to come forward with the new information that he has and let the American people know that, too."

Yet in Sessions's letter to Trump on Tuesday, he reversed course, writing: "I have concluded that a fresh start is needed at the leadership of the FBI.... I must recommend that you remove Director James B. Comey, Jr." And the Rosenstein memo on which he based his recommendation specifically cites Comey's inappropriate release of "degradatory information about the subject of a declined criminal investigation"—namely, Hillary Clinton. Neither Sessions nor Trump explained why they contradicted their earlier stated views of Comey's actions. Just as in the case of Trump's travel ban on Muslims, the president's own public statements repudiate his official reasons for taking a deeply troubling executive action.

The president and attorney general have constitutional authority to dismiss the FBI director, but by statute directors are intended to serve ten-year terms, precisely so that they have a degree of independence from the president. Only one other FBI director has been dismissed in US history, by Bill Clinton in 1993, in a case in which the director, William Sessions—no rela-

tion to Jeff Sessions—was alleged to have committed ethical improprieties, and there was no hint of an attempt by the administration to obstruct justice.

The notion that Trump and Sessions took action against Comey because of his unfairness to Clinton may be the most brazen effort at "fake news" or "alternative facts" yet from a president who has shown no reluctance to lie, even and especially when the truth is plain for everyone to see. And of course, if it was Comey's preelection performance that was the real basis for his removal, he could have been fired on day one of the administration. Instead, as *The New York Times* has reported, his firing came just days after Comey had asked for "a significant increase in resources" for his Russia investigation. As Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois told the *Times*, "I think the Comey operation was breathing down the neck of the Trump campaign and their operatives, and this was an effort to slow down the investigation." If collusion between the campaign and Russia is revealed, it would almost certainly bring down Trump's presidency.

So just as Nixon fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox as he neared the truth about Watergate, so Trump and Sessions seem to be firing Comey just as his investigation accelerates. They had to know they would take tremendous criticism for doing so, including from senior members of their own party. Already on May 9, Senator John McCain issued a statement saying that the action reinforced the need for a Senate select committee to investigate Russia's interference in the 2016 election. (Unlike a special prosecutor, a select committee does not pursue criminal responsibility, but it can provide a

public accounting for any misdeeds and information that can lead to further action. A select committee investigated Watergate, for example.)

Senator Richard Burr, the Republican chair of the Intelligence Committee, said he was "troubled by the timing and reasoning of Director Comey's termination." And Senator Jeff Flake said that he could find no "acceptable rationale" for Trump's action. But Trump and Sessions apparently chose to bear these denunciations knowing that they would pale in comparison to the reaction that an investigation's findings of the Trump campaign's collusion with the Russians would spark.

It remains possible, of course, that Trump's campaign officials did not conspire with the Russians. But there is no doubt that Russia interfered directly in the election in an attempt to aid Trump's chances. And there are serious allegations that several high-level Trump campaign officials had compromising ties to Russian officials, including Paul Manafort, his campaign manager, Carter Page, his foreign policy adviser, Roger Stone, his longtime adviser, and Michael Flynn, whom Trump appointed national security adviser over the warnings of President Obama—as well as of numerous other officials, including acting attorney general Sally Yates and New Jersey governor Chris Christie, who briefly led Trump's transition team—that Flynn could not be trusted.

The somewhat anemic current investigations in both the House and the Senate are controlled by Republicans, and as House Intelligence chair Devin Nunes has shown, party loyalty can all too easily compromise a meaningful inquiry. In early April, Nunes was forced to step down from his committee's investigation after it was revealed that he had briefed Trump about it and had also received classified information from the White House.

That's why Comey was such a threat to Trump. He was the only official independent of the administration and its party reviewing the campaign's ties to Russia. His replacement will be hand-picked by Trump and Sessions, both of whom are at risk of being implicated in the investigation.

The vitality of the rule of law in the United States will depend on whether the American people are willing to hold the Trump administration accountable. As Archibald Cox said, shortly after Richard Nixon fired him as Watergate special prosecutor: "Whether ours shall continue to be a government of laws and not of men is now for Congress and ultimately the American people." We remain a democracy, at least for the time being, and if we the people insist on an independent investigation, we will get one. But only if we insist—including by demanding that our elected representatives take full responsibility for addressing this crisis with every power at their disposal. As Ben Franklin reportedly warned some 240 years ago, the Framers created "a republic, if you can keep it." Trump's latest action puts that question once again to the test. □

—May 11, 2017

\*"What James Comey Did," *The New York Review*, December 8, 2016.



# The Ancient Delights of the Epigram

Hayden N. Pelliccia

## The Greek Anthology, Books 1–5

translated from the Greek by W. R. Paton and revised by Michael A. Tueller. Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 435 pp., \$26.00

### 1.

In its present version, *The Greek Anthology* comprises about 4,500 short poems, composed by authors ranging from the third century BCE to the fourth century CE (with outliers on either end) and including works by many of the most brilliant figures of Greek literature, especially from the Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE). The collection—assembled over hundreds of years—came to Western Europe from Byzantium in the fifteenth century and immediately began to exercise on European poetry and culture an influence whose depth and breadth are even now difficult to gauge.\* “I’ll tell you the best poem ever written in Alexandria,” announces the commander in chief of the British army (Middle East Command) to a dinner party in Evelyn Waugh’s World War II trilogy, *Sword of Honour*. Duly encouraged by his hostess, the general begins:

*They told me Heraclitus, they told me you were dead  
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.  
I wept as I remembered how often you and I  
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.*

*And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,  
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,  
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;  
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.*

This is Callimachus (third century BCE), from the *Anthology*, in the inescapable Victorian translation of William Johnson Cory. Waugh, like other even mildly modernist Englishmen of his era, was both embarrassed by Cory’s sentimental old chestnut and unable to get it out of his head. He had the poetry-plagiarizing hero of *The Loved One* adapt it to commemorate the suicide of his mentor:

*They told me, Francis Hinsley, they told me you were hung  
With red protruding eye-balls and black protruding tongue  
I wept as I remembered how often you and I  
Had laughed about Los Angeles and now ’tis here you’ll lie...*

This trip from the sublime—which Callimachus’s Greek text is—to the

\*Some of their influence is traced in books cited in the footnotes included in the Web version of this review at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



Lawrence Alma-Tadema: Sappho and Alcaeus, 1881

camp and down to the ridiculous is fully in keeping with the spirit of the *Anthology*, the vastness of which accommodates poems of remarkable variety. Under the auspices of the Loeb Classical Library, Michael A. Tueller has published the first volume (books one to five of sixteen) of a projected complete edition of the whole gigantic thing—a fully updated revision of W.R. Paton’s five-volume Loeb from a hundred years ago. It is an ambitious and worthy enterprise, but news of it may make non-initiates wonder what epigrams are, and what this enormous *Anthology* of them is, and why?

### 2.

Sometime in the mid-to-late sixth century BCE, the Greek lyric poet Anacreon, a fixture at the court of Polycrates, tyrant of the island of Samos (just off the western Asia Minor coast), composed an eight-line poem that seems to be the oldest surviving lesbian joke in European literature:

*With his ball of purple and  
Hair of gold, Eros, yet again,  
strikes  
And bids me go play  
With a girl wearing stippled  
sandals.*

*But she, since she comes from  
Posh Lesbos, scorns my  
Hair, since it is white, and  
Gazes, open-mouth, at some  
other.*

The modern reader will hear the word Lesbos and know something is up. Anacreon’s audience did not have that response. The island of Lesbos was known for its rich and cultured cities, and for the fast and luxurious manners the people there had adopted from the Lydian and Persian communities on the mainland to the east, but not for what we call lesbianism. A generation or two before Anacreon, however, Lesbos had produced a poet, Sappho, whose poems present her as a passionate lover of other women. Anacreon created the equation of Lesbian with lesbian by exploiting his audience’s awareness of Sappho’s poetic persona,

and did so by means of a surprise vowel in the last line:

*pros d’ allēn tina chaskei*

*Gazes, open-mouth, at some  
other.*

The words signifying “some other” are *allēn tina*: “other” and “some,” respectively. Greek being a highly inflected language, such words have gender: *tina* serves as both masculine and feminine, and so is indeterminate, but *allēn* is unambiguously feminine. We might have expected the masculine *allon*, but now we find the girl in the poem is gaping at another woman. Her rejection of the speaker, then, is not due to his old gray head, but to her own proclivities: she prefers women to men—like her compatriot Sappho.

So we have not just a gay joke but a gay ethnic joke. The Greeks had a robust enjoyment of ethnic bigotry, but members of the upper class were not prejudiced in favor of heterosexuality: Anacreon’s joke defeats the audience’s expectation not that all sexual desire is heterosexual but that it is most naturally and properly directed toward themselves, the upper-class males. In what little survives of his other poems, Anacreon gives the impression of being up for anything with anybody. We must assume, however, that what he was most valued for was his ability to produce beautifully constructed little poems like “The Girl from Lesbos.”

His legendary status may have been at least partly owed (our ignorance is almost complete) to an ability to improvise such little gems on the spot. At any rate, his brilliant wit and exuberant sense of fun and mischief made him the patron saint of the symposium—the great Greek institution of upper-class male bonding over booze, talk, sex, and song that was borrowed from precisely those Lydians who had ruled the mainland Greeks to the east until they were relieved of power by Cyrus the Great’s Persians sometime in the 540s.

When the Persian axe fell on Polycrates’s own neck, we are told that Hipparchus, brother and cultural minister of the Athenian tyrant Hippias, sent a warship to transport Anacreon from Samos to safety in Athens, where he lingered for some time, leaving a per-

manent mark on the culture of that soon-to-be-great city, in which the symposium was prominent. A number of Athenian vases survive depicting Anacreon partying with his friends, many of whom are men dressed up either as women or as Lydians. (Scholars have had trouble establishing the difference—though Herodotus suggests there wasn’t much of one.)

### 3.

A couple of thousand years after Anacreon died, and less than a decade after the publication of his own critical masterpiece, *Laocoön*, G.E. Lessing (1729–1781) wrote a one-hundred-page essay on epigrams, a

poetic form of which he was himself an experienced practitioner, and to whose history he had devoted considerable attention. The essay begins with the theory and definition of the genre. Here Lessing, refining the observations of some distinguished predecessors, propounded what is sometimes now called “Lessing’s Law”: every true epigram should arouse an expectation (*Erwartung*), which should then receive an emphatic resolution (*Aufschluß*). More bluntly, we might say a proper epigram has two parts, setup and payoff.

We can see that Anacreon’s “Girl from Lesbos” exemplifies this “law” perfectly: the stately, almost leisurely cadences of the first stanza are succeeded by the abrupt misdirections of the second, which lead us unsuspectingly to the surprise of the last line. The poem displays other typical features of epigram: concision (in the Greek, thirty words, eleven in the slow first stanza, nineteen in the more jittery second), wit (sexual, as often), and a tendency to make the audience work a little to get the joke (the “point,” as the barbed conclusion of an epigram is often called).

But Anacreon’s poem has a further surprise for us: although a perfect epigram in Lessing’s sense, for the Greeks it was not an epigram at all. We can see that it served as a model for later Greek epigrammatists, but that observation simply makes all the more plain the peculiar defectiveness of our knowledge. Greek epigram started as one thing and ended up as another, but we cannot confidently explain how or even precisely when the transformation took place.

In the earliest periods—including, by inference, Anacreon’s—the Greek word *epigramma* meant “something written on something else.” Unsurprisingly, the specimens that have survived are the ones that were written on or carved into the most durable materials: the fired clay of a drinking vessel, or a marble tombstone or statue commemorating a victory or dedicated to a god. “Epigram,” in effect, meant not much more than “label”: “Property of Phidias” (on a cup), or “Philo is buried here” (on a gravestone), or “Pisistratus dedicated this to Apollo” (on an altar). But at some point before the third century—nearly two centuries after Anacreon—“epigram” had come to designate a much broader literary

Walters Art Museum, Baltimore/Bridgeman Images



genre recognizable as the direct ancestor of Lessing's modern type.

Contemporary scholars have been puzzled by this evolution, and there may be grounds for thinking that ancient literati were, too. The early "labeling" kind of epigram was often cast in verse. The earliest of these to survive use a variety of meters (some of which are hard to make out), but by the time of Anacreon's death they were mostly being written in elegiac couplets: one dactylic hexameter (the meter of epic) followed by a pentameter, an abbreviated version of the same.

The adoption of this verse form was without a doubt one of the decisive factors in the development of the labeling epigram into the later type. The elegiac couplet had already established itself as the default verse of the symposium, which meant elegy became a kind of omnibus genre, extending from brief complaints about treacherous lovers or political rivals, exhortations to military valor (the symposium was to a great extent the warrior class at play), exuberant celebrations of the joys of youth and intoxication, brooding meditations on age and mortality, and even extended narratives of great local military exploits.

Labeling epigrams, on the other hand, were usually very short, comprising one couplet or two, but sometimes more. The most famous commemorates the heroism of Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans with whom he died refusing to yield the pass at Thermopylae to the Persian invaders of 480 BCE:

*Stranger, bring word to the  
Spartans:*

*By complying with their laws  
we now here lie.*

Herodotus tells us the poem was inscribed on a slab erected where the Spartans fell, and he seems to say it was composed by Simonides of Ceos, a younger contemporary of Anacreon's and something like the official poet of the Persian Wars. The conceit of having the deceased speak the epitaph to a passerby is common, as is, in the case of death and burial away from home, that of asking the addressee to bring news of the loss there. So the supposed mere "label" had already become artful and literary very early on. In fact, it had already been detached from its simply functional use as far back as we can go: "here lies so-and-so" is of course the canonical phrase for burial, appearing in innumerable epitaphs from the sixth century BCE forward. But at *Iliad* 20.389–392, Achilles, kicking off what will be a three-book-long killing spree, delivers a sarcastic address to the corpse of his first victim, an otherwise unknown ally of the Trojans who is named Iphition:

*You lie dead, son of Otrynteus,  
most awe-inspiring of men.  
Your death is here, but your birth  
was by the lake  
Gygaea, where your ancestral  
estate is,  
Alongside the rivers fish-bearing  
Hyllus and swirling Hermus.*

How on earth does Achilles know all this? Obscure regions of central Asia Minor, served up with plausible local details—as if he'd memorized a

mini-biography of every warrior on the Trojan team along with the geography of his native home. The language and themes are explicitly those of grave epigrams. It is very characteristic of Homeric warriors to make stylized taunts over their victims, displaying a cruel ingenuity, wit, and, as here, inexplicably deep knowledge of their opponents' backgrounds and physical circumstances. Here the bitter irony derives from having the slayer compose for the slain a memorial that incorporates the poignant epitaphic motif seen already in the Thermopylae epigram: that of the death far away from home, the geographic details of which the blood-spattered killer looming over the lifeless victim now malevolently savors.

#### 4.

What we must imagine to have happened next in the development from the labeling epigram to the Lessing-like genre is the arrival on the scene of a group of poets who saw themselves as heirs to a combined tradition of verse composed overwhelmingly in the elegiac couplet: the Anacreontic themes of elegy from the symposium brought together with those of the more stylized labeling epigrams. Integration was not difficult. Composing fictional epitaphs, for example, fit easily into the elegiac program of reflecting on mortality, as it has continued to into our own era. This epigram by the American poet and scholar J.V. Cunningham is a good example:

*Here lies my wife. Eternal peace  
Be to us both with her decease.*

We are not entirely sure which poets took the lead in effecting the convergence. For one thing, not much elegy from the fifth and fourth centuries survives. In the early to mid-third century BCE, however, a poet named Asclepiades (stress on the *i*, like Alcibiades), from Polycrates's isle of Samos, revisited Anacreon's "Girl from Lesbos" poem in one of his own, in the elegiac meter:

*I used to play sometimes with  
seductive Hermione  
Who had a girdle of stippled  
colors—O Paphian goddess!  
[i.e., Aphrodite]—  
And the girdle had writing on it:  
"Cherish me," it read,  
"for all time,  
And do not grieve should some  
other possess me."*

By the conventions of labeling epigrams, "me" inscribed on an object refers to the object: here, the girdle. But alert readers will have noticed the presence of Anacreon's trick words "some other" in the last line. This time the word for "other" is given a masculine ending, where we might have expected the feminine, since a girdle is a woman's garment, to be possessed by a woman. If the possessor is a man, then the semi-concealed barb lies in the implication that "me" is seductive Hermione, not her fancy girdle, and "possess" has a second, below-the-belt meaning of "possess sexually."

The setup here is "I used to play"—and by implication do so no longer. What happened? We know by the end. In characteristic Hellenistic fashion, the speaker shows rather more interest in the play he is having with the

history of his literary genre than in any he had with Hermione: the elegiac theme of the affair long past is narrated implicitly, through a report of an epigrammatic "label" on an object described, which, through a surprise gender-switch in the tail reminiscent of Anacreon, is itself revealed to serve as a label of the person who wears it. The little poem epitomizes the hybridity of epigram as it had now evolved.

It is in Asclepiades's generation that we first catch a glimpse of the word "epigram" itself applied to this new hybrid genre: a very fragmentary papyrus preserves what seems to be the book's title page: *Miscellaneous Epigrams: by Posidippus*... (other names may have followed). Posidippus was a Macedonian poet, like Asclepiades active in Macedonian-run Alexandria. These two, together with their contemporary Callimachus, the great scholar-poet already mentioned, seem to have taken the decisive final steps in defining "epigram" as we now know it. One of Callimachus's most famous poems, which had great impact on Horace and other Roman poets, combines into Lessing's bipartite structure (expectation and resolution) two themes of elegy, ethical censure and erotic frustration:

*I loathe the popular poem, and  
I do not esteem  
The road carrying a mob hither  
and yon;  
I hate a boyfriend who gets  
around, and I do not  
Drink from the well: everything  
demotic disgusts me.  
Lysanias, you are indeed lovely,  
lovely—but before  
Echo has said that, some other  
man says "I possess him."*

The speaker here is what the Romans called *fastidiosus*: the origin of our "fastidious," it means someone who feels disgust; not exactly a snob, but rather a narcissist who affects to have sensibilities so hyper-refined that they reject most of the world's contents. Our speaker has forsaken this unsatisfactory world for the wilderness, the place of echoes (i.e., the goddess Echo) and the traditional refuge of the lovesick. He apostrophizes the one thing he can admit a fondness for, the lovely Lysanias, and immediately hears that the youth has been stolen by another.

But by whom? In "before Echo has said that" the "that" must refer to the repeated "lovely": it is an "echo" of the first "lovely." But in other ancient echo poems a first echo cues another—we do not have singletons. So when our speaker hears "some other" man's voice, he is hearing an echo of his own: the name of the goddess Echo (*Ēchō*) and the verb "I possess" (*ēchō*) are almost identical. The speaker hears an echo of his own word *Ēchō* referring to the goddess and chooses to interpret it as some other man's *echō*, "I possess (him)." As Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection, Callimachus's *fastidiosus* speaker has his heart broken by his own voice. Or, we might think, he, like the speaker of Asclepiades's poem, prefers clever wordplay to any human relationship anyhow.

#### 5.

As the *Miscellaneous Epigrams* papyrus suggests, people had started

to organize collections of these little poems. The earlier stages of this process, and the degree to which, if any, the poets themselves participated in it, are unknown. What is known is that at some time around the end of the second century BCE, a poet called Meleager of Gadara put together a large anthology of epigrams by a variety of accomplished poets, including himself. Among his poems is the poetic preface he wrote for the collection as a whole, listing all the poets included.

Meleager cast his net wide, starting as early as Sappho (that she wrote epigrams is doubtful) and continuing through Callimachus and Co. down to his own contemporaries. He regretfully notes that he has had to exclude the best of Anacreon, since it was not written in elegiac verse, but includes a few of his poems that were. (They are mostly proper labeling epigrams and cannot be attributed to Anacreon with any conviction: false attribution to celebrities was rampant.)

Meleager's collection was a great success and spawned imitators: sometime around 40 CE another poet-anthologist named Philip, from Thessalonica, gathered poems written in the 130 years since Meleager. This collection and Meleager's make up the Hellenistic core of the surviving *Anthology*. And yet the production of successor collections kept repeating itself as antiquity made its way toward the Middle Ages, and Rome toward Byzantium.

We know the history of this process largely by reconstructing backward from two extraordinary Byzantine documents. Together they constitute, as the ultimate repository of this long and variegated epigrammatic tradition, *The Greek Anthology* now being reedited by Michael Tueller. Until the early nineteenth century only the shorter of these two manuscripts was known: we call it the *Planudean Anthology* after Maximus Planudes, the early-fourteenth-century Byzantine editor who created it. What Planudes created it from was an even vaster collection of epigrams compiled around 900 CE by a man called Cephalas. Cephalas drew on the anthologies of Meleager, Philip, and their successors. Around 940 Cephalas's anthology was copied in a manuscript along with other material (including a collection of Hellenistic imitations of Anacreon, known suitably as the *Anacreontea*).

This somewhat defective version of Cephalas's collection is now called the *Palatine Anthology*, after the Electoral Palatinate of Heidelberg, where most of the manuscript still resides (the rest is in Paris). Before it resurfaced in the early nineteenth century, our knowledge of the *Anthology* was limited to Planudes's culling from Cephalas; now the roles are reversed, and the much more extensive *Palatine Anthology* is the default text, containing some 4,100 poems in fifteen books. The Planudean adds another 388 poems omitted from the *Palatine*, collected in a sixteenth book. These are the nearly 4,500 epigrams that make up the *Greek Anthology*.

What Tueller has given us now in his first volume is books one to five of the *Palatine Anthology*, the first three of which contain post-classical material (a very small proportion of the whole). Book Four (also very brief) comprises the metrical prefaces written by the

anthologists from Meleager onward—tables of contents, more or less—and Book Five gives us 310 heterosexual love poems. (A later book, excluded by Planudes, supplies 258 homosexual ones: the separating of the two types, unknown to Meleager, was done presumably by Cephalas, in deference to the anti-homosexual legislation initiated by the Christian emperors of the sixth century.)

Book Five includes some of the most delightful and memorable poems of the entire *Anthology*. Asclepiades's poem on the seductive Hermione, discussed earlier, was one of them. They vary greatly in tone and approach. Quite a few are borderline pornographic, and are perhaps, even more than vase-paintings, responsible for the widespread impression that the ancient Greeks were forever at orgy. Here is poem 203, also by Asclepiades, first in W. R. Paton's translation from the original Loeb (1916), and then in Tueller's revision:

Lysidice dedicated to thee, Cypris [i.e., Aphrodite], her spur, the golden goad of her shapely leg, with which she trained many a horse on its back, while her own thighs were never reddened, so lightly did she ride; for she ever finished the race without a touch of the spur, and therefore hung on the great gate of thy temple this her weapon of gold.

Now Tueller:

Lysidice dedicated to you, Cypris, her horse-riding spur, the golden goad of her shapely leg, with which she trained many a supine horse, while her own thighs were never reddened, so lightly did she bounce. She completed the course without the goad, and therefore hung up the golden implement between your gates.

We see here some delicate updating of archaisms, streamlining ("on its back" becomes "supine"), the restoration of an omitted adjective ("horse-riding"), the replacement of the perhaps too-cautious metaphor "ride" with the more playful "bounce," and a slight rearranging of the sentence structure at the close. This is the nature of Tueller's work on Paton's generally very good edition, and it is both helpful and well done.

The epigrams of the *Greek Anthology* are of varying quality, but a great many are superb and uniquely delightful—the word "gem" is almost inescapably applied, as likewise the ironic phrase "small but perfectly formed." The problem for the reader lies in the sheer number of them. It is not beyond human stamina to read through the *Iliad*'s 15,000 lines in one or two sittings, but how many six-line epigrams on fading courtesans can a normal person take? In making my way through Tueller's first volume I have found twenty to be my usual limit per session, and I do this for a living. Any more and the taste buds pall and the attention wanders. Tueller and his publisher should start an e-mail subscription service: *Your Daily Epigram*—Greek text with English translation, some light commentary when needed. Forty-five hundred epigrams would keep us supplied for about twelve years. □

# How He Used Facebook to Win

Sue Halpern

## Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy

by Daniel Kreiss.  
Oxford University Press,  
291 pp., \$99.00; \$27.95 (paper)

## Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters

by Eitan D. Hersch.  
Cambridge University Press,  
261 pp., \$80.00; \$30.99 (paper)

Not long after Donald Trump's surprising presidential victory, an article published in the Swiss weekly *Das Magazin*, and reprinted online in English by *Vice*, began churning through the Internet. While pundits were dissecting the collapse of Hillary Clinton's campaign, the journalists for *Das Magazin*, Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus, pointed to an entirely different explanation—the work of Cambridge Analytica, a data science firm created by a British company with deep ties to the British and American defense industries.

According to Grassegger and Krogerus, Cambridge Analytica had used psychological data culled from Facebook, paired with vast amounts of consumer information purchased from data-mining companies, to develop algorithms that were supposedly able to identify the psychological makeup of every voter in the American electorate. The company then developed political messages tailored to appeal to the emotions of each one. As the *New York Times* reporters Nicholas Confessore and Danny Hakim described it:

A voter deemed neurotic might be shown a gun-rights commercial featuring burglars breaking into a home, rather than a defense of the Second Amendment; political ads warning of the dangers posed by the Islamic State could be targeted directly at voters prone to anxiety....

Even more troubling was the underhanded way in which Cambridge Analytica appeared to have obtained its information. Using an Amazon site called Mechanical Turk, the company paid one hundred thousand people in the United States a dollar or two to fill out an online survey. But in order to receive payment, those people were also required to download an app that gave Cambridge Analytica access to the profiles of their unwitting Facebook friends. These profiles included their Facebook "likes" and their own contact lists.

According to the investigative reporter Mattathias Schwartz, writing in *The Intercept*, a further 185,000 people were recruited from an unnamed data company, to gain access to another 30 million Facebook profiles. Again, none of these 30 million people knew their data were being harvested and analyzed for the benefit of an American political campaign.

Facebook did turn out to be essential to Trump's victory, but not in the way Grassegger, Krogerus, and Schwartz suggest. Though there is little doubt that Cambridge Analytica exploited

Donald Trump



members of the social network, Facebook's real influence came from the campaign's strategic and perfectly legal use of Facebook's suite of marketing tools. (It should be noted that internal Facebook documents leaked in early May show that Facebook itself has been mining users' emotional states and sharing that information with advertisers.)

After the initial alarm that an obscure data firm might have wormed its way into the American psyche deeply enough to deliver the election to Trump, critics began to question what Alexander Nix, the head of Cambridge Analytica, called the firm's "secret sauce," the algorithms it used to predict a voter's psychological profile, what is known as "psychographics." Confessore and Hakim's article about the firm, which appeared on the front page of the *Times*, quoted numerous consultants, working for both parties, who were dismissive of the firm's claims. The mathematician Cathy O'Neil, in a commentary for *Bloomberg*, called Cambridge Analytica's secret sauce "just more ketchup." Using psychological traits to craft appeals to voters, she wrote, wasn't anything new—every candidate was doing it.

For decades, in fact, campaigns have been using and refining "microtargeting" techniques, looking at religious affiliations, buying habits, demographic traits, voting histories, educational attainment, magazine subscriptions, and the like, parsing the electorate in order to understand which values and issues are driving which voters. For a few election cycles starting at the turn

of the century, the Republicans had the advantage, developing a database called Voter Vault that allowed party operatives to understand voters in an increasingly nuanced way. During the 2004 presidential campaign, for example, the Bush team surveyed a large sample of these voters to assess their attitudes and behaviors, and sorted them into thirty groups, each with similar interests, lifestyles, ideologies, and affinities. It then placed every other voter into one of these groups and developed messaging intended to appeal to each one.

By 2008, however, the microtargeting advantage had shifted to the Democrats, who had developed their own enormous, dissectable database of voters called VoteBuilder, run by the Democratic National Committee, and others run by for-profit companies that had been created to support the party's candidates. One of these, Catalist, boasts a national database of 240 million people of voting age, with information on each one drawn from voting rolls, the census, and other public records, as well as commercial data covering "hundreds of fields, including household attributes, purchasing and investment profiles, donation behavior, occupational information, recreational interests, and engagement with civic and community groups." In 2008 and 2012, the Democrats also had more sophisticated models predicting how people with certain attributes might vote.

In the course of the 2016 election, the Trump campaign ended up relying on three voter databases: the one supplied by Cambridge Analytica, with its 5,000 data points on 220 million Americans including, according to its website,

personality profiles on all of them; the RNC's enhanced Voter Vault, which claims to have more than 300 terabytes of data, including 7,700,545,385 microtargeting data points on nearly 200 million voters; and its own custom-designed one, called Project Alamo, culled in part from the millions of small donors to the campaign and e-mail addresses gathered at rallies, from sales of campaign merchandise, and even from text messages sent to the campaign. Eventually, Project Alamo also came to include data from the other two databases.

A principal force behind these various strategies was Brad Parscale, who served as the digital director of the Trump campaign from the primaries through the general election and who in the late spring of 2016 hired Cambridge Analytica as part of this effort. Parscale, who works out of San Antonio, had designed websites for Trump Wineries and other Trump enterprises. Through that work he became friends with Eric Trump, Donald Trump's son, and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and adviser, who Parscale says is like a brother to him.

Further binding these family ties, Parscale's marketing and design firm, Giles-Parscale, recently hired Eric Trump's wife, Lara, to work on Donald Trump's 2020 reelection campaign. "My loyalty is to the family," Parscale told the journalists Joshua Green and Sasha Issenberg, whose *Bloomberg* article "Inside the Trump Bunker, with Days to Go," on the campaign's digital strategy, turned out to be the most prescient piece written about Trump's stunning upset.

In the early phase of the primaries, Parscale launched Trump's digital operation by buying \$2 million in Facebook ads—his entire budget at the time. He then uploaded all known Trump supporters into the Facebook advertising platform and, using a Facebook tool called Custom Audiences from Customer Lists, matched actual supporters with their virtual doppelgängers and then, using another Facebook tool, parsed them by race, ethnicity, gender, location, and other identities and affinities. From there he used Facebook's Lookalike Audiences tool to find people with interests and qualities similar to those of his original cohort and developed ads based on those characteristics, which he tested using Facebook's Brand Lift surveys. He was just getting started. Eventually, Parscale's shop was reportedly spending \$70 million a month on digital advertising, most of it on Facebook. (Facebook and other online venues also netted Trump at least \$250 million in donations.)

While it may not have created individual messages for every voter, the Trump campaign used Facebook's vast reach, relatively low cost, and rapid turnaround to test tens of thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of different campaign ads. According to Issie Lapowsky of *Wired*, speaking with Gary Coby, director of advertising at the Republican National Committee and a member of Trump's digital team:

On any given day...the campaign was running 40,000 to 50,000



variants of its ads, testing how they performed in different formats, with subtitles and without, and static versus video, among other small differences. On the day of the third presidential debate in October, the team ran 175,000 variations. Coby calls this approach “A/B testing on steroids.”

And this was just Facebook. The campaign also placed ads on other social media, including Twitter and Snapchat, and ran sponsored content on *Politico*. According to one estimate by a campaign insider, the Trump team spent “in the high eight figures just on persuasion.” Remarkably, none of this money was used on ads created from Cambridge Analytica’s questionably obtained Facebook data.

Not long after touting the edge it gave the Trump campaign, Cambridge Analytica began walking back its initial claim that psychological targeting was crucial to Trump’s victory. “I don’t want to break your heart; we actually didn’t do any psychographics with the Trump campaign,” Matt Oczkowski, Cambridge Analytica’s chief data scientist, told a panel hosted by Google five weeks after the election. Because the firm was only brought onto the Trump campaign the summer before the general election, he said, “we had five months to scale extremely fast, and doing sexy psychographics profiles requires a much longer run time.” Apparently, Cambridge Analytica had deployed its psychological targeting techniques during the Republican primaries on behalf of Ted Cruz, but Cruz’s failure to win the nomination was cited as evidence that Cambridge Analytica’s models were ineffective and that the company did not understand American politics.

Though Cambridge Analytica came late to American elections, its British parent company, Strategic Communications Laboratories (SCL), has been a client of the United States government for years. SCL has “provided intelligence assessments for American defense contractors in Iran, Libya and Syria,” according to the *Times*, and developed so-called influence campaigns for NATO in Afghanistan. Also in Afghanistan, SCL engaged in “target audience analysis” for the United States Department of Defense, identifying who was susceptible to American propaganda. The firm’s methodology, according to its website, has been approved by the UK Ministry of Defence, the US State Department, Sandia National Laboratories, and NATO. It seeks “to understand empirically what the right levers or ‘triggers and filters’ in a given population are, based on a penetrating psychological understanding.” SCL is currently seeking contracts with at least a dozen US agencies, and *The Washington Post* recently reported that it has already secured work with the State Department.

Strategic Communications Laboratories may have a special advantage in these efforts now that Cambridge Analytica is largely controlled by Robert Mercer, one of Trump’s major donors. According to *The Guardian*, Mercer now owns 90 percent of the company, with SCL owning the remaining 10 percent. (Mercer is also the money behind Breitbart News, the

website credited with serving up fake and hyped-up articles to incite Trump’s base.) Steve Bannon, Trump’s chief strategist and the former executive chairman of Breitbart News, was on the Cambridge Analytica board until he became the Trump campaign’s chief executive. Robert Mercer’s daughter, Rebekah, served on Trump’s transition team and has stayed on as a Trump adviser. She now runs Making America Great, a pro-Trump advocacy organization largely funded by her father that is dedicated to creating influence campaigns to push what has been called a nationalist—anti-immigration, anti-government—agenda. Its day-to-day director is Emily Cornell, who stepped down as Cambridge Analytica’s senior vice-president for political affairs to take the position.

Meanwhile, as SCL pursues government contracts, Cambridge Analytica is also vying to create influence campaigns on behalf of the Trump Organization, the parent company of Trump’s various business interests. As an unnamed conservative digital strategist told *The Guardian*, the data from Cambridge Analytica could be helpful in both “driving sales and driving policy goals. Cambridge is positioned to be the preferred vendor for all that.”

But weeks before the Mercers set up Making America Great, Brad Parscale had already created his own Trump advocacy group, called America First Policies. The creation of two independent organizations both ostensibly aimed at mustering support for Trump appears to have presaged the fault line that is now emerging between Steve Bannon and the Mercers on one side, and Jared Kushner (and by default Giles-Parscale) on the other. This division was also manifest days after the election as members of team Trump took a victory lap, with Cambridge Analytica’s Nix crediting his firm with the win, and Parscale declaring to the contrary that it was his and Kushner’s overall digital strategy that took Trump over the top.

Either way, that rift pulls back the curtain on contemporary electioneering—electioneering in the age of big data and social media, both of which were crucial to Trump’s victory, and were used in innovative ways that are likely to be adopted by other candidates from both parties. As Daniel Kreiss points out in his book *Prototype Politics*, losing campaigns, especially, look to the winning one “to find models for future action.”

There is no doubt that Trump’s digital operation—overseen by Parscale with the involvement of Giles-Parscale, Cambridge Analytica, the Republican National Committee, and scores of contractors—drew heavily on Barack Obama’s 2012 reelection playbook. Recalling that campaign, Kreiss describes how the Democrats repurposed a marketing strategy called “uplift” or “brand lift” and used it to pursue voters they identified as receptive to Obama’s message. They did so by gathering millions of data points on the electorate from public sources, commercial

information brokers, and their own surveys, then polling voters with great frequency and looking for patterns in the responses.

All this was used to create predictive models of who was likely to vote for Obama, who was not, and who was open to persuasion. It also indicated who would be disinclined to vote for Obama if contacted by the campaign. These models sorted individuals into categories—let’s say, mothers concerned about gun violence or millennials with significant college debt—and these categories were used to tailor communications to members of each



Brad Parscale, the Trump campaign’s digital director, Trump Tower, New York City, October 2016

group. Kreiss observes that such sorting was necessary because

it would have been nearly impossible to create personalized messages for individuals from a labor standpoint.... And...the cost of testing individual appeals to determine whether they were actually successful in order to justify the expense of creating them would have been astronomical.

In his 2015 book *Hacking the Electorate*, Eitan Hersch is skeptical about the value of commercial data in predicting political outcomes—his research shows that public records are crucial. Echoing Kreiss, he writes that “even in well-financed campaigns, there is rarely an interest among campaign strategists to send fifty different messages to fifty different segments of voters.” The Trump campaign, with its “A/B testing on steroids,” turned this conventional wisdom on its head.

There were other digital innovations as well. On election day, for example, the Trump campaign bought all the ad space on YouTube and ran a series of five thirty-second videos, each hosted by a different Trump surrogate representing a particular segment of the Trump base. We “learned that putting Mr. Trump on persuasion ads was a bad idea,” Cambridge Analytica’s Oczkowski said in April at a meeting of the Association for Data-Driven Mar-

keting and Advertising in Melbourne, Australia. Instead, there was Ivanka Trump, representing mothers and business women; Willie Robertson, the star of the television show *Duck Dynasty*, to appeal to southerners and hunters; Milwaukee sheriff David Clarke, representing law and order and diversity (he is African-American); the former Navy Seal Marcus Luttrell to appeal to veterans and their families; and Ultimate Fighting Championship president Dana White, a tough, aggressive guy’s guy.

“There was no targeting,” Oczkowski explained. “Every single American who [went] to YouTube that day [saw these ads].” And, he continued, once viewers watched one of the thirty-second videos to the end, they landed on a screen with a polling place locator. “We had tens of millions of people view the videos and hundreds of thousands of people use the ‘find your polling place’ locator. When you’re talking about winning by thousands of votes, this stuff matters,” Oczkowski said.

Parscale’s strategy of using Facebook’s “dark posts” also turned out to matter, enabling the Trump campaign to attack Clinton with targeted negative ads that flew below the public radar. Dark posts are not illegal. They are not necessarily “dark.” Unlike a regular Facebook advertisement, which appears on one’s timeline and can be seen by one’s friends, dark posts are invisible to everyone but the recipient. Facebook promotes them as “unpublished” posts that “allow you to test different creative variations with specific audiences without overloading people on your Page with non-relevant or repetitive messages.”

Phrased this way, dark posts sound benign, even benevolent. Parscale and his crew had other ideas. Facebook dark posts, used in tandem with more traditional attack ads, were part of the Trump team’s concerted effort to dissuade potential Clinton voters from showing up at the polls. (In March, Cambridge Analytica won an Advertising Research Foundation David Ogilvy Award for its “Can’t Run Her House” ad, which used a clip from the 2008 Democratic primary of Michelle Obama criticizing Clinton.)

“We have three major voter suppression operations under way,” a senior campaign official told *Bloomberg’s* Green and Issenberg. One targeted idealistic white liberals—primarily Bernie Sanders’s supporters; another was aimed at young women—hence the procession of women who claimed to have been sexually assaulted by Bill Clinton and harassed by the candidate herself; and a third went after African-Americans in urban centers where Democrats traditionally have had high voter turnout. One dark post featured a *South Park*-like animation narrated by Hillary Clinton, using her 1996 remarks about President Bill Clinton’s anti-crime initiative in which she called certain young black men “super predators” who had to be brought “to heel.”

“We’ve modeled this,” the unnamed senior campaign official told Green and Issenberg. “It will dramatically affect her ability to turn these people

out.” And it did. Democratic turnout in battleground states was weak, which was crucial to Trump’s victory. Tallying it up three days after the election, David Plouffe, Obama’s 2008 campaign manager, noted:

In Detroit, Mrs. Clinton received roughly 70,000 votes fewer than Mr. Obama did in 2012; she lost Michigan by just 12,000 votes. In Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, she received roughly 40,000 votes fewer than Mr. Obama did, and she lost the state by just 27,000. In Cuyahoga County, Ohio, turnout in majority African-American precincts was down 11 percent from four years ago.

Trump’s digital team was also aided by the candidate’s unbridled use of Twitter, by WikiLeaks, by fake news generators like Breitbart, and by an army of so-called “Twitter bots,” automated Twitter accounts—many of which are thought to have emanated from Russia and at least one thousand of which the neo-Nazi website Daily Stormer claimed to have created. Together, all this sent a river of pro-Trump and anti-Clinton messages coursing into cyberspace, giving the Trump campaign a continually self-reinforcing narrative. And then there was the candidate himself and his blustery, contradictory pronouncements, often pandering to voters’ racially tinged resentments. This might have been the undoing of another candidate, but for the Trump team it turned out to be an asset.

“Trump didn’t have a lot of ‘Here is my agenda, here is my narrative, I have to persuade people to it,’” Catalyst’s Laura Quinn told me.

The Trump world was more like, “Let’s say a lot of different things, they don’t even necessarily need to be coherent, and observe, through the wonderful new platforms that allow you to observe how people respond and observe what works, and whatever squirrel everyone chases, that’s going to become our narrative, our agenda, our message.” I’m being very simplistic, but that was the very different approach that truly was creative, different, imaginative, revolutionary—whatever you want to say.

Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but winning the popular vote does not automatically lead to the White House, and Trump was never going to try to appeal to the entire electorate. Applying Cambridge Analytica’s algorithms, Trump’s data scientists built a model they called Battleground Optimizer Path to Victory to rank and weight the states needed to get to 270 electoral college votes, which was used to run daily simulations of the election. Through this work, the digital team identified 13.5 million persuadable voters in sixteen battleground states, and modeled which combinations of those voters would yield the winning number.

As the campaign wore on, it didn’t look good. The Trump team’s numbers were similar to those being posted by Nate Silver on his FiveThirtyEight website, which showed Hillary Clinton winning handily. Before the election, in a call to reporters, a spokesperson for Cambridge Analytica rated Trump’s chance of winning at 20 percent.

Brad Parscale apparently saw it differently. “You know, I always thought we had a much better chance to win

than everyone,” he told NPR’s Rachel Martin. A few weeks before the election, he said he had a hunch from reading Breitbart, Reddit, Facebook, and other nontraditional news sources, and from the campaign’s own surveys, that there were whole segments of the population—people who were angry and disaffected—that were being missed by traditional pollsters and the mainstream media. These were people who may not have voted in the past but would be a stealthy source of support were they to show up on election day. Parscale’s data scientists reweighted their model to reflect this.

Once the Battleground Optimizer Path to Victory model took account of this cohort, and showed that the ones who lived in Rust Belt states had the most likely chance of delivering the presidency to Trump, Parscale’s digital team focused all its resources in those last few weeks on these voters. This included sending the candidate himself to Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania in the days before the election, even though those states were considered by most observers likely to be unsympathetic to him, because the reweighted Cambridge Analytica algorithms were pointing there, and those algorithms dictated the candidate’s travel schedule. “[Clinton’s] strategy was...if I turn out enough people in urban areas, Republicans can’t make up those numbers in rural areas,” Cambridge Analytica’s Oczkowski explained. “Little did she know that almost every rural voter in the country was going to show up in this election.”

There are many ways that the Democrats lost the election, starting with the foibles of the candidate herself. If the

Republicans had lost, that would have been the prevailing story about them and their candidate as well. That the Republicans didn’t lose can be attributed in large measure to their expert manipulation of social media: Donald Trump is our first Facebook president. His team figured out how to use all the marketing tools of Facebook, as well as Google, the two biggest advertising platforms in the world, to successfully sell a candidate that the majority of Americans did not want. They understood that some numbers matter more than others—in this case the number of angry, largely rural, disenfranchised potential Trump voters—and that Facebook, especially, offered effective methods for pursuing and capturing them. While this is clearly the future of campaigns, both Republican and Democratic, it also appears to be Trump’s approach to governing.

Much was made in the last days of the campaign of the fact that if Donald Trump lost, he could take his huge database, Project Alamo, which he owns outright, and start an insurgent political movement or build his own media company. As Steve Bannon said at the time, “Trump is an entrepreneur.” But Trump didn’t lose, and he still owns that database, and it continues to serve him well. In the first three months of his presidency, when only 36 percent of the country gave him a favorable rating, Trump and the Republicans raised \$30 million toward his reelection. As a point of reference, this is twice as much as Obama raised in the first three months of his first term, while enjoying much higher approval ratings. What our Facebook president has discovered is that it actually pays only to please some of the people some of the time. The rest simply don’t count. □

## A Better Way to Choose Presidents

Eric Maskin and Amartya Sen

Our recent essay “The Rules of the Game: A New Electoral System” [*NYR*, January 19] provoked thoughtful responses from many readers—in letters to *The New York Review*, in blog postings and columns, and in private communications. We are grateful to the *Review* for giving us the chance to reflect on some of the ideas that came up, and also to say something about the French presidential election.

Our essay proposed two improvements to US presidential elections. First, in both presidential primaries and the general election, we would replace plurality rule (in which each voter chooses a single candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins, even if he or she falls short of 50 percent) with majority rule (in which voters rank candidates, and the candidate preferred by a majority to each opponent wins). Second, we would reform the Electoral College so that nationwide vote totals rather than statewide totals determine the winner.

Currently, all but two states rely on both plurality-rule voting and a winner-take-all system to award Electoral College votes: the candidate with the most votes, no matter how far short of a majority, wins the state and gets all of its



Supporters of Emmanuel Macron celebrating his victory in the French presidential election, Paris, May 2017

electoral votes. By contrast, two states, Maine and Nebraska, use plurality-rule voting but a proportional system to award Electoral College votes. In either case, however, plurality-rule voting is seriously vulnerable to vote-splitting, which arises when candidate A would defeat candidate B in a one-

on-one contest, but if candidate C (who appeals to some of the same voters as A) also runs, then A splits the vote with C, giving B the victory.

Vote-splitting has had a profound influence on many presidential elections, for example, in 2000, when Ralph Nader took votes from Al Gore,

enabling George W. Bush to win; in 1992, when Ross Perot cut into George H.W. Bush’s support, allowing Bill Clinton to prevail; and in 2016, when Republican candidates such as Marco Rubio, John Kasich, and Ted Cruz divided the mainstream Republican vote in the early primaries and thus gave outsider Donald Trump a path to the nomination.

In view of the unhappy history of plurality rule, some readers have suggested instead using runoff voting, another well-known voting system. Under runoff voting, each voter again chooses a single candidate, but if no candidate gets a majority, the two top vote-getters face each other in a second round. This is the method used for electing presidents in France, but as French history shows, it too is highly subject to vote-splitting.

On April 23, Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen finished first and second in the first round of the French election, and as a result faced each other in the May 7 runoff. However, most available evidence shows that if the third-place finisher, François Fillon, had faced Le Pen head-to-head,

he would easily have won (even the fourth-place finisher, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, would quite possibly have beaten her one-on-one). Thus the fact that Macron faced a runoff against Le Pen, as opposed to against Fillon or Mélenchon, seems anti-democratic. (And Le Pen's post-election claim that she is the main opposition to Macron is clearly inaccurate.) As an extremist, she had been able to "divide and conquer" her way into the final round.

Macron, who was elected president decisively in the second round with 66 percent of the vote, seems likely to be the true majority winner; one-on-one, he defeated Le Pen and probably would have done the same against the other candidates. But French elections don't always produce a winner who has the most overall support among voters. In 2002, for example, Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin failed to advance to the runoff because he split the left-wing vote with several others and finished third, while incumbent president Jacques Chirac and National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen (Marine's father) came in first and second, respectively. Chirac handily defeated Le Pen in the second round, but the shocking thing was that Le Pen was in the runoff rather than Jospin. Not only would Jospin have easily defeated Le Pen in a two-man race, but he might have beaten Chirac head-to-head as well. There's a good chance that the wrong man—in this case, Chirac—was elected president.

By contrast, majority rule avoids such vote-splitting debacles because it allows voters to rank the candidates and candidates are compared pairwise: if a majority of voters rank candidate A ahead of B, this ranking holds whether or not C runs too, and so there is no sense in which C can take votes away from A. Several readers have suggested going a step further by having voters grade candidates (say, on a scale of 1 to 5) and electing the candidate with the highest average score—much as gold medals are awarded in Olympic diving. But there is a big difference between grading in the Olympics—where standards are clear and judgments reasonably impartial—and grading in politics, where criteria are highly variable and personal. Thus we doubt that grading schemes could work successfully in political elections: grades would have no common meaning, and voters would have strong incentives to distort the grades they award candidates.

The most obvious rationale for reforming the Electoral College is to make it conform to the principle of "one citizen, one vote" (as one reader put it). The Electoral College under current rules violates this principle; a vote by a Californian doesn't count the same as one by an Ohioan. A number of other readers have pointed out, however, that there is a more subtle reason for reforming the Electoral College, one connected to majority rule.

Because it reduces vote-splitting, majority rule would encourage more major candidates to run in the general election. For example, under the existing system, Michael Bloomberg and Bernie Sanders had a powerful disincentive to run as independent candidates in the general election last fall because of the overwhelming likelihood that they would have split Hillary Clinton's vote and handed the election to Donald Trump. But under majority rule, they could have run without this fear.

There is a risk that the presence of additional major candidates might prevent any one of them from getting 270 votes in the Electoral College. This could be avoided by amending the Electoral College system so that the winner is the candidate who wins the nationwide vote under majority-rule voting. Such a change could be instituted, for example, by revising the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact initiative, in which a state pledges to award its electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote as long as states totaling at least 270 electoral votes make the same pledge. (The compact has already accumulated states worth 165 electoral votes.)

Specifically, we suggest that the national popular vote winner be defined as the national majority-rule winner (not the plurality-rule winner). Such a winner can be said to truly reflect voters' preferences. In our view, this is the most important reform to aim at. □

## LETTERS

### HOW TO IMAGINE CONSCIOUSNESS

To the Editors:

Thomas Nagel's review of *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* [NYR, March 9] clearly distills Daniel Dennett's argument, which tends to get lost amidst the book's digressions. And his critique homes in on the part that's hardest to swallow—the idea that subjective experience (in Nagel's words) "is just a belief, manifested in what I am inclined to say." I agree with Nagel, along with probably 99.9 percent of humanity, that we really do experience "color, flavor, sound, touch, etc." We don't just say we do.

But, probably along with 99.9 percent of neuroscientists, I don't think "the trouble [with Dennett's claim] is that...*nothing whatever* is revealed to the first-person point of view but a 'version' of the neural machinery." Studies in which stimulating various parts of the brain induces full-blown experience indicate that versions of the neural machinery are indeed all that the first-person point of view is based on. The problem is that we have no idea *how* patterns of neural activation cause experience, not *whether* they do.

Nagel's suggestion that "nonphysical factors" are involved doesn't help. As is frequently noted, the physical basis of life itself used to be just as mysterious as consciousness, and it's now well explained by biochemistry and molecular biology, without nonphysical factors. So although science as we know it doesn't explain the link between neurons and consciousness, why expect the link to be "nonphysical" rather than "novel physical"? What is a nonphysical factor, anyway? If the dark energy propelling the expansion of the universe, the strong force holding atomic nuclei together, etc., etc., are physical, do we really need anything more exotic?



One route forward, advocated by, for example, Peter Godfrey-Smith, is to consider activities of neurons or neural networks that could have generated a precursor of full consciousness. Lots of things in biology—like the development of an organism from an egg—seem impossible, until we stretch our imagination to conceive of simple precursors and mechanisms that could have been worked on by natural selection over billions of years. To quote one of Dennett's nice lines, "evolution is a process that depends on amplifying things that almost never happen." We need to determine what "thing," what activity of neurons beyond activating other neurons, was amplified to the point that consciousness arose. What would a precursor of "feeling like" be? That's what we need to stretch our imaginations further to figure out.

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**Thomas Nagel replies:**

Professor Black's letter contains a misunderstanding. He says, "The problem is that we have no idea *how* patterns of neural activation cause experience, not *whether* they do." But I do not deny that patterns of neural activation cause experience. What I doubt is that patterns of neural activation alone constitute or are experience—if neural activation is a purely physical process.

The mind-body problem that exercises

both Daniel Dennett and me is a problem about what experience is, not how it is caused. The difficulty is that conscious experience has an essentially subjective character—what it is like for its subject, from the inside—that purely physical processes do not share. Physical concepts describe the world as it is in itself, and not for any conscious subject. That includes dark energy, the strong force, and the development of an organism from the egg, to cite Black's examples. But if subjective experience is not an illusion, the real world includes more than can be described in this way.

I agree with Black that "we need to determine what 'thing,' what activity of neurons beyond activating other neurons, was amplified to the point that consciousness arose." But I believe this will require that we attribute to neurons, and perhaps to still more basic physical things and processes, some properties that in the right combination are capable of constituting subjects of experience like ourselves, to whom sunsets and chocolate and violins look and taste and sound as they do. These, if they are ever discovered, will not be physical properties, because physical properties, however sophisticated and complex, characterize only the order of the world extended in space and time, not how things appear from any particular point of view.

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